

WHEN GOD'S WORD ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH: EXPLORING CHRISTIAN
DISCOURSES IN THE COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English and Education)
in The University of Michigan
2009

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To my parents—
my earliest and best evidence that faith and intellect
can coexist

and

To Mike—
I won't say that I couldn't have done this without you;
I will say that I am glad I didn't have to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many, many people to whom I am grateful for their help and support during the completion of this project. First I want to thank my committee members—Anne Ruggles Gere, Anne Curzan, Lesley Rex, and Elizabeth Vander Lei—for reading my work, for lending their expertise to this project, for pushing me as a writer and a scholar, and for being so generous and encouraging as they did so. It is hard to imagine what this project would look like without the influence of any one of them. I am also grateful to those at the University of Pittsburgh who first sparked and encouraged my interest in composition studies: Mariolina Salvatori, Kathryn Flannery, Jim Seitz, Jennifer Seibel Trainor, and Dave Bartholomae.

I am grateful to all of the students and instructors who volunteered to participate in this study. They are the core of this work.

I want to thank the JPEE program and all of the wonderful people in it for creating a sense of community at such a large university. Thanks also to Jeanie Laubenthal, Bonnie Campbell, and Lori Scott, who have made my life easier and more pleasant in countless ways. I am grateful to the Dissertation Writing Institute, and in particular to Louis Cicciarelli—thanks for reading, for reminding me to acknowledge what had been accomplished, and for frequent use of the phrase “you’re really close.”

Thanks to Karen Morris, Staci Shultz, Chris Palmer, Brett Griffiths, Hyun-ju Kim, and Jennifer Buehler for listening, advising, and reminding me of what’s important. Thanks to my family-in-law, for your support and love. Thanks to Megan Rokop for keeping me going for the past 22 years, and to Emily Chiodo, for having more confidence in me than I actually merit.

I am deeply grateful to my family. Many thanks to my brothers, my sisters-in-law, my niece, and my nephews, for bringing me joy even in times of difficulty. And special thanks to my parents, Robert and Bette Thomson, who have encouraged me through this and every other project I've taken on.

Finally, I must thank my husband Mike, who has also been editor, administrative assistant, cook, housekeeper, counselor, and pep talk provider as needed. I am truly blessed. TMAT delivers.

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ABSTRACT

This study—a hybrid project that blends empirical research traditions from the social sciences and composition studies—examines how discourses of Christianity and composition operate in college writing classrooms. Conducted at a large, public, Midwestern university, this qualitative study analyzes surveys and interviews of writing instructors and Christian students, providing new insights on how religious discourses shape perceptions and behaviors of both students and instructors—including instructors’ feedback on student writing, the student-instructor relationship, and students’ rhetorical choices. By putting student and instructor voices into conversation, this study offers a more expansive view of how religious discourses can affect composition classrooms than has been available to scholars and instructors up to this point.

Discourse analysis of the survey and interview data revealed several sources of the tensions that Christian discourses can bring to the classroom. Some writing instructors hold perceptions of Christian students as a group that influence their responses to student work and contribute to assumptions about individual Christian students’ academic ability and engagement. Some Christian students draw on instructors’ comments about controversial issues or on preconceived ideas about academe to make assumptions about instructors’ political and religious beliefs; some become uneasy about their position at a

secular institution; and some expect negative reactions to religious expression. They are therefore faced with difficult choices about disclosing or silencing their religious identity. Instructors and Christian students also tend to define the work of the writing course and the goals of academic writing differently, indicating that they are working at cross purposes as they try to communicate their ideas about how religious discourses affect students' writing.

These findings suggest that there are significant points of conflict between student and instructor discourses, and that instructors and Christian students sometimes face great difficulty as they try to communicate with one another. There are, however, points of overlap between these discourses as well, and they may be opportunities for students and instructors to articulate—for themselves and to each other—how they are thinking about academic writing, about religious discourses as part of that writing, and about the purposes of the composition course.

Chapter One

CULTURALLY PRIVILEGED, ACADEMICALLY SUSPECT: CHRISTIAN DISCOURSES IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION COURSES

A few years ago, a student came to my office hours to discuss an essay she'd turned in the day before. She was visibly anxious, and after watching her fidget and struggle for a minute to speak, I asked if she was nervous. She was, she said—because she'd written about her Christian beliefs in the essay. Her father had advised her not to turn it in. She looked at me, eyes a little wide, then looked down at her hands and waited for me to speak.

Two things struck me—and continue to strike me—about this conversation. First was the student's obvious anxiety about the kind of response the expression of her beliefs would elicit from me. The second was her decision to include these beliefs in her paper, despite being advised by her father not to do so. As we began talking about her essay, it became clear that she felt confident that her religious discourse played a necessary role in her academic work. What she'd been less sure of was how I'd react as an instructor to her choices.

Though I had not yet read her essay, I faced uncertainty, too. What if her use of religious discourse struck me as ineffective or inappropriate for the assignment, despite her confidence that it belonged there? If that was the case, how was I to respond in a way that respected her beliefs *and* asked her to reconsider their position in her academic writing? How would my own beliefs factor into my reading of her work?

I've thought back to that afternoon in my office frequently over the past couple of years as I've conducted research studying the competing discourses of Christianity and composition. As I've encountered Christian students writing and talking about how their religious beliefs apply to their work in composition courses, it's becomes clear that while many students see connections between their religious beliefs and the work of the course,

they worry that their instructors do not. Some, like my former student, make what they feel are the right choices for their writing and hope for the best.

Others avoid the potential risks. For many Christian students—and for instructors who have to find ways to respond to writing and class discussions that incorporate religious discourses—there is an element of uncertainty and anxiety about how (if at all) religious discourses should enter into the collegiate writing classroom, and this sometimes leads to embarrassment and/or frustration on the part of students and instructors. Embarrassment and frustration around religious discourses in the writing classroom are evident in scholarship as well (C. Anderson; Downs; Goodburn; Rand; Smart), and the desire to understand and to find ways to alleviate these feelings of discomfort is part of what inspired me to design a study to get students and instructors talking and writing about Christian discourses. In this chapter, I argue for the need for a study (and continued study) of students' religious discourses in college composition courses—particularly in terms of how they compete with the discourses of composition—and I situate my research in relation to that need.

There are several ways in which I see a study of the often-competing discourses of Christianity and composition contributing to the field of composition studies. First, this study adds to a small but developing body of work on religion in the field. Although there has been some recent scholarship addressing religion and religious discourses, historically there has been very little attention to these issues in composition studies. I began this research in part because there seemed to be so little scholarship on the topic of religion in composition studies, scholarship that could help instructors think through encounters like the one with my Christian student.

I'd been picking up on tensions around Christian discourses and the discourses of composition from instructors in my capacity as a Graduate Student Mentor, in informal discussions with colleagues in the English department, and in conversations with my own students who had decided to submit papers that incorporated their Christian beliefs. Though composition courses include students from many faith traditions, Christian students—perhaps due to the historical tensions between Christianity and higher education, the cultural power Christian discourses seem to wield, their large numbers on many college campuses, or the particular ways in which Christian discourses affect

student writing and engagement—are the ones with whom instructors appear to have the most difficulty.

Also, this study includes voices that are not often present in composition scholarship. Christian students are rarely allowed to speak for themselves in scholarship about their discourses and their writing. Though they are often quoted or paraphrased in articles about how their beliefs affect the writing classroom, their words, actions, and writing are almost always filtered through the perspective of their instructors. This study incorporates Christian students' own descriptions of their writing, their instructors, and their positions in the classroom and on campus, as well as their interpretations of how religious discourses—and their instructors' perceptions of those discourses—affect their place and their work in the composition classroom. This is a significant departure from scholarship in which students' perspectives are assumed or ignored, or in which students' writing is presented without their reflections on that work.

The inclusion of Christian students' voices is important not just in gaining a fuller understanding of a particular student population and what they bring to the classroom, but also in challenging the ways in which these students are often stereotyped and dismissed. Priscilla Perkins argues that Christian students “are one of the only cultural groups openly and comfortably disparaged by many otherwise sensitive writing instructors” (586), and these students are, indeed, sometimes cast by instructors and scholars as ignorant, intolerant, or worse. By including data from a group of Christian students, this study demonstrates how even within a relatively small population of Christian students, there is diversity in perspective on writing, on how religious discourses factor into academic work at a public university, on composition courses, on politics, and so forth. What emerges from this data, then, is a fuller and more nuanced discussion of Christian students and how they affect the writing classroom than has previously been available.

This study also draws from data provided by a group of writing instructors, which is a move away from scholarship on student-instructor interactions or conflicts that focuses narrowly on the author-instructor's personal experiences dealing with Christian students (or an individual Christian student). Rarely are the views of multiple instructors

joined in conversation as they are in this study.¹ Though “anecdotal” scholarship can be significant, and has certainly informed my work, this study provides a different way of approaching instructors’ experiences with Christian students. Bringing multiple instructors’ perspectives on Christian students and discourses into one place exposes some of the key challenges instructors face as they encounter Christian students, illuminates important patterns of response, and allows for a kind of description not possible with a narrower focus.

Third, my research puts Christian students’ and composition instructors’ voices in conversation *with one another* regarding the role of religious discourses in the writing classroom—particularly regarding how members of each group define the purposes and/or work of composition courses. Represented in this study are forty instructors and forty-five students, and putting these voices together exposes some of the ways in which instructors and Christian students are thinking differently about the composition course, as well as points of agreement or overlap. This conversation also advances the field’s continual efforts to better understand and articulate its purpose(s) and its role within American colleges and universities.

This study is a hybrid genre, in that it blends two traditions of empirical research—from the social sciences and from composition studies. In the social sciences, empirical studies are driven and shaped by sets of criteria about what constitutes valid and trustworthy research, and claims and hypotheses are warranted by the data resulting from these studies. In composition studies, empirical research is often shaped by the researcher’s experience and observations, and claims and hypotheses are warranted by anecdotal evidence and rhetorical argument.

This empirical study was designed according to social sciences criteria for qualitative research, but claims and hypotheses developed from the data are also put in conversation with empirical scholarship in composition studies. In other words, I employed methods of rigorous interpretation according to accepted social sciences

¹ *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Lenore Kyburz, is a notable exception. Though the book is a compilation of essays by various scholars, many of whom focus on specific encounters with individual students, Vander Lei and Kyburz do important work to frame and synthesize these essays. In doing so, they bring together multiple voices and make clear how these voices contribute to the broader conversation around the presence of religious discourses in the composition classroom.

criteria, and also studied my findings in light of and in response to the themes and issues emerging from the composition scholarship.

This hybridity is significant because it offers another option for providing evidence and making claims about how Christian discourses affect composition education. Empirical results, as defined in the social sciences, push composition scholarship on religious discourses past reliance on anecdotal evidence and rhetorical argument, providing a rich data set from which to formulate descriptions and hypotheses and allowing for a broader disciplinary conversation about Christian students and discourses as they relate to the writing classroom. Also, a study of this kind can enrich and challenge anecdotal scholarship by putting it in conversation with sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory evidence. Composition scholarship, on the other hand, can be used to push the social science researcher toward interpretive insights. It can add perspective and theoretical density to confirm, challenge, and expand empirical interpretations.

This first chapter looks broadly at the cultural contexts informing my qualitative study of students and instructors at a large public university as a way to present the current landscape of academia (and composition more specifically) as one in need of scholarship that attends to religious discourses. In the first section, I contextualize my study by describing some of the cultural and academic forces that shape the ways religion is discussed and dealt with in composition courses. I note multiple voices contributing to these conversations, and give a sense of how these often competing discourses complicate the expression of religion at a public university.

Second, I discuss two recent books—Sharon Crowley’s *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* (2006) and Abby Nye’s *Fish out of Water: Surviving and Thriving as a Christian on a Secular Campus* (2005)—in order to argue that composition courses are at least partially shaped by the ways in which academics and students portray Christian discourses and their roles within the broader culture and in academia. I compare the authors’ competing perspectives on Christian discourses, and my discussion illuminates some of the ways in which instructors and Christian students who encounter texts like these may arrive with an impoverished view of the “other” group before ever encountering them in the classroom.

Finally, I make the case for why the cultural and academic contexts presented in the first portion of this chapter warrant a contemporary study of some of the competing Christian and composition discourses operating in college composition courses, and how my study aims to explore these issues. This brief final section is not intended to give a detailed account of my methodology, which will be addressed in detail in the next chapter, but rather to reinforce the need for the work of this study at the outset. At this point, however, it's important to define some of the central ideas and concept(s) that recur throughout my study.

Defining "Discourse" and "Discourses"

When I refer to *discourse* in the context of this dissertation, I am drawing on James Gee's notion of discourses as "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities" (*Introduction* 526).² In other words, I am not looking at discourse simply as a string of lexical parts, but as a complex set of social and linguistic practices. As Gee writes, "Discourses include much more than language" (*Social* xv).

With this emphasis on beliefs, attitudes and social identities, discourse is very similar to a person's guiding worldview or perspective. An important distinction between discourse, as I'm using it, and worldview, however, is that while a worldview is a perspective on what the world is and should be, discourse (in addition to being a perspective on the world) is also a way of being *in* the world, of acting and participating in the world through social, cultural, and political practices, relationships, and interactions.

Throughout my discussion I use *discourse* as both a mass and a count noun. I understand discourse to be instances of communication through language, or as Gee describes it, "any stretch of language (spoken, written, signed) which 'hangs together' to make sense to some community of people who use that language (*Social* 103). *Discourses*, as I am using the term, means "conventional ways of talking that both create and are created by conventional ways of thinking" and in their linguistic dimension "are

² This way of approaching discourse is commonly associated with Gee's "Big D" discourse.

conventionalized sets of choices for discourse” (Johnstone 3). Gee’s definition is also helpful. He explains that discourses—plural—are “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles by specific *groups of people*” (*Social* xix, emphasis original).

When I refer to Christian (or religious) discourses and the discourses of composition in this study, then, I am drawing on this broad sense of discourses as ways of thinking, believing, and valuing, as well as ways of talking or writing. I also use the plural of discourse to acknowledge that there is not one unified “Christian discourse” or “discourse of composition,” but that there are multiple, changing discourses surrounding both Christianity and composition, and that different students and instructors will use these discourses in different ways.

As I approach the discourses represented in my data, what I am seeing is an inherently ideological reflection and construction of cultural practices, power relations, and values (Fairclough and Wodak; Rogers). How students and instructors write or talk about Christianity reveals perceptions, beliefs, and norms that are connected to the broader practices of the discourse communities to which they belong.

From this perspective, discourses are neither neutral nor passive. Judith Butler writes, “Language is a name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do . . . and that which we effect, the act and its consequences” (8), and her articulation of language *as* action (and its consequences) is applicable to the way I am approaching discourse. Discourse carries both constitutive and transformative possibilities; it is both meaning and meaning making. In the discourses of students and instructors, I am witnessing (and participating in) the ways in which participants “circulate and prescribe meanings” as well as the ways that they negotiate power and exert influence in their world (Blunt 5).

Competing Discourses

In her 1997 *College English* essay, Lee Ann Carroll writes, “The writing class has value because it is a place to play around with language, with different discourses” (922). I want to take a step back from, or perhaps a step into, this statement, in order to analyze

what is happening during “play” with language and discourses, and what it might mean to study competing discourses at work in a context such as a university classroom.

What this play looks like and what its implications are depend on one’s view of language and discourse. If language is a “mediator of world-view” (Lee 1); if discourses are “ideological strategies” that serve to “construct, sustain and change institutional and societal structures” (Chick 28); and if discourses are closely tied to identity and to power relations (Sachs 151), then what students and instructors are doing when they “play around” in a composition course can actually be a very significant and consequential kind of work.

Gee’s expansive definition of discourses is helpful to a study of a particular student population and its discourses, and for locating tensions between competing discourses, which carry conflicting ideologies with them. If discourses are “ways of being in the world,” it stands to reason that when competing discourses are brought together—and in the case of my study, that happens in composition courses—tensions will arise between users of these discourses.

Lily Orland-Barak notes that “[j]uggling competing discourses requires understanding the power dynamics at work that shape what they do” (363), and this is one of the most challenging aspects of working with Christian student discourses and the discourses of composition. If competing discourses are to be productively engaged in some way, it is important to understand the power dynamics that factor into that engagement—instructors who wield institutional authority over their students, Christian students who bring cultural privilege into the classroom with them, and composition scholars, who have the power to shape the ways in which these students are represented and discussed in the field.

Distinguishing the Concepts of Spirituality, Religion, and Christianity

Though my study focuses on the experiences of students and instructors in relation to Christian discourses, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the discussion of these experiences overlaps with larger conversations about religion and spirituality. The overlap means that the terms are sometimes conflated, and that various

students, instructors, and scholars employ them in various ways—without always explaining their choice or the distinctions they make between them.

I see *spirituality* as the broadest of the three, as it encompasses both organized religious practices as well as less “traditional” (at least in the United States) or institutionalized ways of understanding purpose, the soul, the concept of a higher power/being, and the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the earth. For example, the “Spiritual Sites of Composing” interchange written by Ann Berthoff, Jan Swearingen, JoAnn Campbell, James Moffett, and Beth Daniell draws on the notion of spirituality to present a broad image of how the spirit might be attended to in the writing classroom, including through the vehicle of meditation—a practice that is not (in this context) connected to any particular religion. Spirituality is not mentioned as frequently as religion or Christianity in the context of this study, but I do draw from certain scholars who address the issue of spirituality in higher education, and I think that the larger conversations surrounding the inclusion and exclusion of spiritual practice or discussion can inform my research. For example, discussions of spirituality engage with the intangible and with perspectives that are not strictly “rational,” and these concepts are relevant in a study of religious discourses that draw on concepts of faith, God, and a divinely inspired text—concepts that are sometimes portrayed by skeptics as irrational or illogical.

Religion—though it is itself a broad term that could certainly be understood to include spiritual practices that are not rigidly institutionalized—tends to be invoked in reference to organized, prescribed (by sacred text, clergy, prophecy, and in some cases, government) practices. In the context of a study situated in an American university, it seems impossible to keep a discussion of Christianity rigidly separate from broader, ongoing conversations about the relationship of religion to higher education, especially because “religion” has often been associated specifically with (Protestant) Christianity.

Christianity is the narrowest of the three terms, though it should be noted that “Christian” is not a monolithic term. As Diana Eck observes, “Christianity is dynamic and multivocal, and what it means to be a Christian ‘in spirit and in purpose’ is highly contested among Christians themselves” (44). Because of its contested nature, I resist imposing any rigid definition of Christianity here, and instead allow definitions of

Christianity to emerge from students', instructors', and scholars' descriptions. I approach Christianity with the understanding that its millions of adherents occupy a host of other subject positions and represent diverse cultural backgrounds (even within the United States), and will therefore interpret it in various ways. Most significant for the purposes of this study are the beliefs, assumptions, and connotations that various parties bring to a discussion of Christians and Christianity.

Defining "Christian" Students

In the context of this study, I use the term *Christian* to denote a follower and/or worshipper of Jesus Christ whose commitment to their faith is a significant (or *the* significant) dimension of identity.³ Also signified by *Christian* in this context is a faith that is academically and intellectually influential—in other words, faith that is a key factor in shaping the ways that the believer reads, analyzes, interprets, and writes. The Christians who exhibit this kind of faith seem to be the “problematic” ones, the ones who appear most frequently in instructors' narratives and in scholarship related to the pedagogical challenges associated with Christian students in the classroom.

I resist adding labels to this group of Christian students, in part because the adjectives typically appearing in front of *Christian* in order to identify a group of believers who exhibit particular religious discourses often carry pejorative connotations. *Born again* and *fundamentalist* are two examples of descriptors often used to depict specific Christians as radical, zealous, conservative, or intolerant. Even *evangelical*—a word used within various Christian communities—is something of a troubled term, as it is sometimes used as a more polite-sounding stand-in for *fundamentalist* or *conservative*.

Several of the scholars I cite in this study do choose to use the term *evangelical* to describe a certain kind of student or Christian, and the term carries with it particular associations. In “The Opening of the Evangelical Mind,” published in a 2000 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Alan Wolfe posits the following definition of evangelical Christians:

³ I will be using “their” as a singular pronoun, as I find that “their” is less cumbersome than the available alternatives for marking gender neutrality. “Their” will be used frequently in my discussion of survey data, as surveys were anonymous and did not elicit information about respondents' gender identification.

The terms ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘evangelical’ are sometimes conflated, because the movements have common origins. But beginning in the 1930s some conservative Protestants began to distance themselves from the extreme anti-modernism of more-vocal fundamentalists, and adopted the term “neo-evangelical” to describe themselves. Since then it has been possible to describe evangelicals as Christians who are conservative in their theology and usually, although not necessarily, conservative in their politics.

The association of *evangelical* with *conservative*—an association sometimes stated without qualifications like Wolfe’s (see Bryant 1)—is one key reason for leaving this term out of my discussion. I did not ask student participants about their political affiliations or even the particularities of their theology,⁴ and therefore did not want to employ a label that may imply a strictly conservative perspective.⁵

Christian student participants themselves make distinctions between those who fit under the large umbrella term “Christian” and those who stand out as smaller, more specifically defined student populations. One student participant, for example, explains the difference between being Christian because one’s parents are Christian or because of a general cultural connection to Christianity and being an actively practicing Christian.⁶ However, the most important reason for resisting specific labels of Christian students is that students themselves did not use such labels. Not one student participant described themselves or their religious community as *born again*, *fundamentalist*, or *evangelical*, and it therefore seems unwarranted and unethical to apply these terms to them.

Contextualizing this Study within Higher Education and Composition Studies

⁴ It is important to note, however, that one student respondent specifically identified as *not* conservative, reinforcing my impulse not to use labels associated with conservatism.

⁵ “Evangelical” invites other implications as well. In an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example, Michael D. Lindsay scrutinizes the ways in which evangelicals are characterized, particularly within academia, and he counters some of the most common perceptions of this group. He claims, for instance, that evangelicals are more intellectually engaged than academics tend to think, and that they are distinctly different from fundamentalists in the ways in which they seek change and interact with other groups (B13). What Lindsay’s analysis highlights is the way in which “evangelical” can carry significant connotations specifically regarding students’ relation to higher education.

⁶ This distinction connects to the issue of whether or not Christian students are a minority on campus, because the application of minority status depends on one’s definition/conception of “Christian.”

The relationship between Christianity and higher education has often been an uneasy one, and it is tied to a larger debate about how institutions of higher education should or should not address religious values and beliefs. Though there is much scholarship related religion and higher education, and there are entire books dedicated to the relationship of Christianity to American higher education, it is worth briefly touching upon a few significant historical moments here. These moments provide a sense of how public universities in the United States have been shaped by their Christian foundations and by their struggle to separate from those foundations. A look at history also reminds us that concerns about the proper place of Christianity (and religion more broadly) within the public university are not new.

Historical Tensions between Christianity and Higher Education

Though tensions between religious interests and higher education have a long and complex history, I will focus here on just a few historical moments that scholars such as George Marsden and Warren Nord point to as crucial times of change or turmoil within universities as they struggled with and against their Protestant Christian heritage. The first is the late 19th century. By 1890, most state universities still had institutionalized religious practices such as required chapel services, but higher education was rapidly secularizing (Nord 84). Evangelicalism and literal Biblical interpretation were beginning to come under fire as Enlightenment ideals and the ideas of intellectuals like John Dewey and Charles Darwin gained popularity.

By the 1920s, chapel services were no longer mandatory at most state universities, there had been a sharp decline in Christian campus ministries, and changing mores around sex and alcohol had contributed to a decrease in student involvement in Christian churches and groups (Marsden 343-44). In the 1940s-50s, however, there was a resurgence of religious fervor on college campuses and in the United States more broadly, precipitated by WWII and the emergence of totalitarian governments. In the 1950s, college students were as likely as the rest of the population to belong to a church, and mainline Protestantism “could genuinely be considered to be flourishing” (Marsden

14).⁷ Even during this time, however, formal institutionalization of Christianity was held at bay by questions of pluralism—particularly in terms of whether institutionalized religion meant including Jewish and Catholic heritage and faculty—and by educational secularism, which had grown in favor beginning in the late 19th century.

The 1960s brought dramatic social change—civil rights activism, anti-establishment sentiment, the impact of the war in Vietnam—that influenced campus life. Also, in 1963, the Supreme Court outlawed formal religious exercises in public schools (*Abington Twnshp v. Schemp*). These changes, along with the establishment of religious studies as a discipline defined via the scientific method and social science methods (a move that positioned religion as a scientific object of study), seemed, according to Marsden, to have solidified the official disestablishment of Protestant Christianity at public universities (414, 435).

I’ve touched briefly on this span of seventy years or so to highlight that though some would argue that by 1900, religion “was no longer to be found in the heart of education” (Nord 63), there has been much back and forth motion between religious and secular forces at American universities. Though there have been dramatic shifts and (perhaps) a permanent movement toward secularization, the relationship between religion and higher education is ongoing, and its past informs its present and its future.

There has long been public and scholarly interest about the religious or secular nature of public education. Conservative Christian groups have frequently advocated religion as “the source of moral education” (Urban and Wagoner 330); some Christian scholars have bemoaned the public university’s tendency to “exclude or discriminate against relating religious experience to intellectual life” (Marsden 6); and the concept of academic culture as a community “embodying and inculcating certain values and practices” has drawn harsh criticism from many different voices (Dillon 85)—Christian voices among them. Pushes for religious influence in education have often come attached to conservative political agendas, or with the goal of exposing the lapsed morals of secular education (Urban and Wagoner 329-30).⁸

⁷ Interestingly, it was in 1951 that William F. Buckley published *God and Man at Yale*, a scathing critique of what he saw as Yale’s rejection of Christian principles.

⁸ Urban and Wagoner cite the Enlightenment as a particularly significant historical moment in terms of causing a rift between Christianity and public education, quoting Thomas Paine’s 1804 statement, “The

Distrust of academia's treatment of religion is certainly not a new phenomenon among certain scholars or in popular culture. Consider the following excerpt from *Cosmopolitan* magazine:

Those who are not in close touch with the great colleges of the country, will be astonished to learn the creeds being foisted by the faculties of our great universities. In hundreds of class-rooms it is being taught daily that the decalogue is no more sacred than a syllabus; that the home as an institution is doomed; that there are no absolute evils; that immorality is simply an act in contravention of society's accepted standards; that democracy is a failure and the Declaration of Independence only spectacular rhetoric; that the change from one religion to another is like getting a new hat; that moral precepts are passing shibboleths; that conceptions of right and wrong are as unstable as styles of dress; . . . and that there can be and are holier alliances without the marriage bond than within it (qtd in Marsden 267).

The paragraph above is part of Harold Bolce's piece "Blasting at the Rock of Ages," published in the magazine's May 1909 issue. Despite appearing a century ago, many of the concerns touched upon here remain salient to contemporary debates: moral relativism; movement away from (or perceived lack of respect for) sacred texts; challenges to institutions of family and marriage.

The tensions between religion and higher education in the United States are well documented in both popular and academic media, and they have not faded quietly into history, even as the divide between religion and public education has widened (Marsden 6, 414; Miller 52; Nord 86, 96; Willard 10). Religion and its relationship to higher education is a frequent topic of study and discussion in current issues of publications like *The Chronicle of Higher Education*⁹ and *Inside Higher Ed*,¹⁰ and has been the focus of

Christian system of religion is an outrage to common sense. Why is man afraid to think?" (68). Also demonstrating the dynamics between religion and higher education are a long line of court cases, including *Axson-Flynn v. Johnson* (1998); *Bannon v. School District of Palm Beach County et al* (2004); *Rosenberger v. University of Virginia et al.* (1995), and so forth.

⁹ "Atheist Students on Campus: From Misconceptions to Inclusion" by Kathleen M. Goodman (1/30/09); "Intelligent Design or Intelligible Design?" by Frederick Grinnell (1/09/09); "Salvation from Narrow-Mindedness" by H. William Rice (10/3/08); "How to Help Students Confront Life's 'Big Questions'" by Barbara E. Walvoord (8/15/08); "The Place of Personal Faith in the Classroom" by John D. Barbour (1/25/08); "Jesus is Not a Republican" by Randall Balmer (6/23/06); "Rationality and Religion" (Letters to the Editor, 2/3/06); "How Christianity (and Capitalism) Led to Science" by Rodney Stark (12/2/05); "Religious, Philosophical, and Socioeconomic Diversity" by Carol M. Swain (9/9/05); "The Right to Tell the Truth" by Anne Marie B. Bahr (5/6/05); "Choosing Their Flock" by Burton Bollag (1/28/05); "The Gospel of Born-Again Bodies" by R. Marie Griffith (1/21/05)

¹⁰ "Why More Colleges Want Jewish Students" by Elizabeth Redden (10/29/08); "Debating Ideas vs. Legitimizing Falsehoods" by Scott Jaschik (10/22/08); "Crusade Against a Crusader" by Scott Jaschik

numerous recent books and articles by education historians, scholars who are members of various academic fields, and other members of campus communities.¹¹ In many cases, religion seems to be as big a “problem” as ever.

Some would even argue that religion is a *more* significant issue than ever. In his article “One University, Under God?” Stanley Fish notes the increasing significance of religious identity in the post-9/11 cultural climate, and argues that institutions of higher education need to be better prepared to engage religious thought in a deeper, and more difficult, way than as a distant object of study. His call is echoed by scholars like Mark Edwards, who is concerned that the academy has moved too far in the direction of exclusion in its attempts to quell discrimination and break from a dominant Protestant history (2). Michael D. Lindsay, in an article about the resurgence of evangelicalism in academia, claims, “religion has become a vitally important area of scholarly inquiry” (B13). In 2005, some professors found themselves butting heads with David Horowitz’s “academic bill of rights,” which their students invoked to resist what they saw as the secular liberal bias of academe and that includes language specifically protective of religious belief and freedom.¹²

(7/28/08); “What Would Jesus Do (in College)?” by Elizabeth Redden (6/30/08); “Students and Faith” by Scott Jaschik (6/14/07)

¹¹ *The Decline of the Secular University*, C. John Sommerville (2006); *Christianity in the Academy*, by Harry Lee Poe (2004); “Anti-Christianity: The Accepted Form of Bigotry” by Peter Reynolds (2/21/05 in *The Heights*, Boston College’s student newspaper); *Religion, Scholarship, & Higher Education*, ed. Andrea Sterk (2002); “Christian Students Search for Acceptance on Campus” by Karen Schwartz and E. Chase Wesley (10/29/02 in *The Daily Midwestern*, University of the Midwest’s student newspaper); *Religion & American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma*, by Warren A. Nord (1995); *The Soul of the American University*, by George M. Marsden (1994); *Exiles from Eden*, by Mark R. Schwen (1993)

¹² The academic bill of rights upholds the following principles: 1. All faculty shall be hired, fired, promoted and granted tenure on the basis of their competence and appropriate knowledge in the field of their expertise and, in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts, with a view toward fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives. No faculty shall be hired or fired or denied promotion or tenure on the basis of his or her political or **religious beliefs**. 2. No faculty member will be excluded from tenure, search and hiring committees on the basis of their political or **religious beliefs**. 3. Students will be graded solely on the basis of their reasoned answers and appropriate knowledge of the subjects and disciplines they study, not on the basis of their political or **religious beliefs**. 4. Curricula and reading lists in the humanities and social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge in these areas by providing students with dissenting sources and viewpoints where appropriate. While teachers are and should be free to pursue their own findings and perspectives in presenting their views, they should consider and make their students aware of other viewpoints. Academic disciplines should welcome a diversity of approaches to unsettled questions. 5. Exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the subjects examined in their courses is a major responsibility of faculty. Faculty will not use their courses for the purpose of political, ideological, **religious** or **anti-religious indoctrination**. 6. Selection of speakers, allocation of funds for speakers programs and other student activities will observe the principles of academic freedom and promote intellectual pluralism. 7.

It would seem that public universities have not yet achieved a peaceful space in which religious views are respected but not forced upon others, where religious thought can be part of the conversation without dominating the conversation. It is also apparent that Christianity remains a particularly significant issue for higher education. An online search of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* articles for 2007¹³ identifies dozens of articles dealing with the subject of Christianity or Christian students—there are articles about the Intelligent Design debate; use of the Bible as a resource in teaching Western civilization; faith camps for high schoolers heading off to college, and so on.

A series of legal cases in 2005 raised the question of whether or not campus Christian student groups had the right to require leaders (or members in general, depending on the case) to be Christian, and whether they should be permitted to exclude members based on sexual orientation.¹⁴ Also published in 2005 was an article written by a political science professor who states that she has “encountered overt and subtle forms of intimidation” because of her Christian identity (Swain). These legal battles, along with stories from Christians in academia, highlight how fraught issues of Christianity and higher education are with personal, political, social, ethical, and institutional tensions.

The Religion Problem

An exploration of any aspect of student identity brings with it a certain measure of discomfort and trepidation, and the study of students’ religious discourses carries its own particular set of complications. Many scholars remain suspicious of religious ideology,

An environment conducive to the civil exchange of ideas being an essential component of a free university, the obstruction of invited campus speakers, destruction of campus literature or other effort to obstruct this exchange will not be tolerated. 8. Knowledge advances when individual scholars are left free to reach their own conclusions about which methods, facts, and theories have been validated by research. Academic institutions and professional societies formed to advance knowledge within an area of research, maintain the integrity of the research process, and organize the professional lives of related researchers serve as indispensable venues within which scholars circulate research findings and debate their interpretation. To perform these functions adequately, academic institutions and professional societies should maintain a posture of organizational neutrality with respect to the substantive disagreements that divide researchers on questions within, or outside, their fields of inquiry.

¹³ This was the year I began the research for this chapter.

¹⁴ For example, the Arizona State University chapter of the Christian Legal Society won their case against the University, claiming that the University’s attempts to revoke their recognition violated their free speech and free association rights. The Christian Legal Society had been involved in multiple cases, including cases against The Ohio State University and the University of Toledo.

especially as it relates to intellectual work. David Bleich, for example, writes that “[r]eligious views collaborate with the ideology of individualism and with sexism to censor the full capability of what people can say and write” (qtd in Hairston, “Diversity” 182). For Bleich, religion is just a differently spelled “-ism” to be avoided in a free intellectual environment. In a recent discussion initiated by The John Templeton Foundation (an organization dedicated to “supporting science” and exploring “the big questions” facing scientists and philosophers¹⁵), the prompt question “Does science make belief in God obsolete?” elicited a “yes” from Steven Pinker (professor of psychology) and Victor J. Stenger (emeritus professor of physics and astronomy), and a “no, but it should” from Christopher Hitchens (public intellectual and author of the much-publicized books *God is Not Great* and *The Portable Atheist*). These responses cast belief in God as an archaic, perhaps even primitive, response to life’s mysteries. Not all scholars—probably not even most scholars—subscribe to such a clear-cut view of religious belief, and it should be noted that several respondents to the question above answered “no.”¹⁶ However, a survey released in 2006 did find that “while most professors believed in at least the possibility of God’s existence, they were more than twice as likely to be skeptics or atheists as the general population” (Barlett).

Mark Edwards, in *Religion on Our Campuses*, claims that religious beliefs are held to a much higher standard of evidence than nonreligious beliefs, if they are allowed into academic conversation at all (147). Arguing for careful inclusion of religious thought into the free exchange of ideas cherished in intellectual forums, Edwards notes—and criticizes—the fact that religious views on morality are “seen as so much worse than nonreligious views on morality” (147). Edwards claims that while religion was rightfully removed from a central, authoritative position in academe, it has now been erased too entirely from disciplinary conversations.

David Claerbaut takes this argument one step further, claiming that religious thought is not merely silenced, but actively attacked, in the now-prevalent secular culture

¹⁵ <http://www.templeton.org>

¹⁶ The discussion of The John Templeton Foundation question is not meant to provide statistical evidence regarding the prevalence of anti-religious sentiment in academia, as the nature of the Foundation’s purpose likely means a search for a group of respondents who represent a wide range of perspectives on the question.

of public institutions. According to Claerbaut, universities perpetuate the “myth of value-neutrality,” yet they are anything but ideologically neutral. He writes:

Unlike much of postmodern culture that is largely indifferent to faith, secular education does not peacefully coexist with faith-centered learning. Secularism is, of ideological necessity, antagonistic to faith and is largely characterized by a virulent, almost militant, agnosticism, one that attacks the very faith tenets on which the American university was founded (32).

Though some would argue that there is no official constraint on religious perspectives in the classroom or in scholarship, James Turner, a professor of history and of humanities at the University of Notre Dame, claims that contemporary academic culture inhibits expression of religious perspectives even without any “official” renouncement of them. As an example, he writes:

True, there is no formal bar to the use of any intellectual tradition whatsoever in contemporary scholarship. Neither is there any official obstacle to first-string linemen on the Florida State University football team majoring in astrophysics. Few, however, are observed to do so, because the culture of big-time football does not nourish in its inhabitants an interest in the more rigorous and arcane sciences. There is likewise, I believe, a scholarly culture that tends to assume that religion is a dead force intellectually: that its traditions, however interesting for historians or anthropologists, do not speak to live issues in scholarship today (20).

In other words, Turner argues, the accepted cultural norms of the academic community are enough to silence religious perspectives.

Religion, according to Bleich, Edwards, Claerbaut, and Turner, has a bad name in academia, and such a reputation inevitably touches students who profess strong religious belief and affects instructors struggling to communicate effectively with those students. For Christian students, the perceived “bad name” of religion on college campuses may contribute to a desire to segregate themselves as a form of protection. Recently published books aimed at Christian high school and college students would certainly seem to support the notion of Christian students setting themselves apart from the general student body. Abby Nye’s *Fish Out of Water*, J Budziszewski’s *How to Stay Christian in College*, Tony Campolo’s *Survival Guide for Christians*, and other similar handbooks and guides are aimed, in part, at preparing Christian students to be outsiders at secular universities. Whether or not these handbooks are helpful or hurtful, misguided or spot-

on, they reveal a continuing tension between dominance and power, religious thought and secular intellectualism.

Religious Discourses in Composition: A Challenge for Students and Instructors

The fact that nearly every college student across the country enrolls in at least one composition course (most often first-year writing) makes understanding of how religious discourses affect composition courses an important issue for study. As part of a core curriculum at many public universities, and as a field that tends to draw upon relevant social and political issues in its theory and pedagogy, composition studies also offers a suitable context for thinking about religion as the new “center of intellectual energy in the academy” (Fish C1).

In the May 1994 *College Composition and Communication*, an interchange by Ann Berthoff, Beth Daniell, JoAnn Campbell, Jan Swearingen, and James Moffett called “Spiritual Sites of Composing” provided what some scholars cite as the first focused discussion of religion and spirituality in composition studies.¹⁷ This written exchange presents the argument that “contemporary intersections of literacy and spirituality have gone largely unrecognized in our discipline” (Daniell, “Composing” 240). Berthoff calls for an articulation of the spiritual as well as the political dimensions of what compositionists do (237); Daniell critiques the absence of religion and spirituality from discussions of literacy (239); and Campbell advances the notion that students are “intellectual but also physical, emotional, and spiritual beings” and that all of those facets of identity enter the classroom with them (250).

As “intellectual . . . physical, emotional, and spiritual beings,” college students often have a difficult time adjusting to the demands of what may be new academic discourses, difficulty that can be particularly acute for students whose familiar discourses seem to be out of step with the those they encounter at a university. In his well-known essay “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae discusses students’ acclimation to their new academic environment, and their struggles to imitate and perform the new discourses they encounter there. He explains that when undergraduate students sit down

¹⁷ This published interchange grew out of a 1992 panel at the CCCC convention with the same focus (Berthoff 237).

to write, they are “try[ing] on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the *various* discourses of our community” (511, emphasis original).

Composition courses, as Bartholomae and others make clear, are contexts in which students learn to navigate academic discourses. It is also recognized as a highly politicized space in which students are challenged to question the status quo and to think critically about their own convictions and allegiances (Berlin; Daniell, “Composing”; Giroux; Harkin). As Linda Flower writes:

the activity of writing includes not just hands on the keyboard but acts of self-fashioning and institutional disobedience, of immersion in the conversation of a discourse, response to peers, resisting and appropriating conventions, as well as constructing new meaning. And this activity is a site of unremitting contradiction, contestation, and conflict (98).

Or, as Charles Paine puts it, composition instructors are “bringing [students] to a healthful understanding of the complexity and confusion of their culture as well as the complexity and confusion of their role in that culture” (295). Students are doing more than learning to write for an academic audience; they are navigating discourses of power and difference. Beyond trying on new “ways of knowing,” they are asked to question and critique their own current ways of knowing.

For many students, their ways of knowing include religious beliefs, and for a large number of American students, those beliefs stem from Christian traditions. As adherents to a culturally dominant belief system, students who identify as Christian are sometimes looked upon with suspicion. In an article in *College English*, Shari Stenberg calls the skepticism about Christian students and what they bring to college classrooms “intellectual distrust.” She writes:

in academic culture, religious ideologies are often considered hindrances to—not vehicles for—critical thought. This feeling may be especially true in regard to Christianity, which is often conflated with conservative politics and fundamentalism both in and outside of the academy (271).

Christian students are faced, sometimes for the first time, with an academic environment that does not necessarily privilege a Christian worldview, and in fact may specifically critique or challenge it. Composition courses, which frequently focus on exposing

students to new ways of thinking about the world, can be sites of particular tension both for students who cling tightly to religious discourses and for instructors who attempt to get these students to loosen their grip just a bit.

Thomas Newkirk, in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, notes that "the problem of evangelical Christians in the writing class . . . is a topic that deserves more sensitive attention than it has been given" (15). Newkirk's statement is revealing in a couple of ways. First, it presents evangelical Christian students¹⁸ as a "problem" in the context of a writing course, indicating that these students are a source of disruption or consternation that begs for a solution. Second, it calls not just for "attention," but *sensitive* attention to this problem. One can assume that Newkirk's call for sensitivity implies that the "intellectual distrust" discussed by Stenberg is an insufficient or inappropriate response to the needs of these students.

Sensitivity is required not solely because religious faith is a delicate subject, but also because of the demands a composition course makes on all of its students. No matter what their beliefs and backgrounds, composition students are asked to negotiate unfamiliar discourses that challenge constructs such as the "autonomous self" *while* they are trying to write a successful academic essay that will please their teacher and peers (Carroll 917). Carroll argues that the "postmodernist perspective, now permeating composition studies" asks students and teachers to see themselves as fragmented beings, and also "challenges [them] to rethink what [they] are doing when [they] read, write, and talk [their] way through projects" (916). The kind of reflexivity called for here can be profoundly unsettling, and perhaps more so for students who come into the classroom with firm belief in a clearly defined, seemingly unified universal truth.

Though postmodernism may call for instructors to "give up grandiose, romantic notions that Freshman Comp can fix students either personally or politically" (Carroll 918), the politically-charged nature of composition studies may make it difficult to try to break from pedagogies that attempt to "liberate" students—politically, socially, or otherwise (Daniell, "Theory" 128). Many scholars—Virginia Anderson, Linda Brodkey,

¹⁸ Though Newkirk specifies "evangelical" students here, it stands to reason that "problematic" Christian students of any description would require the kind of attention he suggests.

Henry Giroux, and bell hooks, for example—would argue that such a break is neither possible nor desirable.

In fact, some composition scholars are calling for more politically and socially progressive approaches to composition studies. David Wallace argues that composition studies is in need of a more substantive praxis of difference in order to “transcend normativity”—to be more inclusive and to be more responsible in scholarship. He conducted a study of several recent volumes of *College English*, looking for the ways in which difference was (or was not) dealt with in various volumes and articles. This analysis led Wallace to the conclusion that while difference is mentioned quite a bit in *College English*, difference is not dealt with as productively or progressively as possible. Relevant here is the particular attention Wallace pays to religion, specifically to Christianity.

At several points, Wallace criticizes Anne Ruggles Gere for her statement about the dangers of acknowledging religious devotion in academic circles, claiming that she minimizes her privilege as a Christian even as she cites her “otherness” (504, 511, 527). While Wallace appears to miss the important point that Gere is referring specifically to *academic* culture and not to *American* culture at large, he draws attention to the awkward position Christians occupy as culturally privileged and academically suspect, referring even to his own experience of discomfort in having his Christian background noted in an academic context (504). He also raises provocative questions about the strange absence of religion and/or spirituality as a topic of discussion in recent volumes of *College English*. He writes:

when difference issues were raised, gender/sex and race were almost ubiquitous presences. The same cannot be said for other difference issues . . . There was very little topical attention paid to the issue [of religion/spirituality]. Religion/spirituality was rarely center stage as the major topic of consideration (515, 518).

He notes that “only 2 of 204 authors spoke as practicing members of any faith,” and he expresses concern that certain identity categories are not being articulated and discussed as fully as others. “With the possible exception of gender/sex,” he writes, “religion/spirituality seems the most hardwired, the most ingrained in culture of the difference issues; yet it was rarely topicalized” (518). Wallace’s claim about the nature

of religion/spirituality may be debatable, but he does identify a significant gap in scholarly attention to issues of difference.

Recent scholarship in the field seems to reflect a move toward increasing instructors' awareness of and focus on particular segments of the student population. *College English*, for example, dedicated its entire July 2006 issue to "Cross-Language Relations in Composition," encouraging instructors to "become more responsible and responsive users and teachers of English and outline some ways we can make use of and be more hospitable to language differences and peripheralized discourses in composition" (Bawarshi 652). *College Composition and Communication* offers a similar array of articles focused on diverse student populations. Philip P. Marzluf notes the ways in which African American, Latino American, and Native American students are asked to "demonstrate their commitment to their vernaculars" (513); Vershawn Ashanti Young discusses the racial and class issues faced by black male students (700); and David Borkowski reflects upon his experiences as a "working-class academic" and how those experiences influence the way he teaches his "predominately working-class students" (115). Part of the work that these articles—and many other related articles, books, and conference presentations—accomplish is to make visible some of the assumptions made about certain groups of students, and to challenge composition scholars and instructors to revisit or reimagine composition theory and pedagogy in light of these assumptions and their potential consequences.

Though not as ubiquitous as the scholarship related to race or gender, research on religious identity—particularly on Christianity as it connects to the composition classroom—has become more visible in recent years. In 2001, Lizabeth Rand wrote that "[m]ost writing instructors eventually will face the question of how to respond to students who identify as Christian" (357), and she and others have begun to face that question in their scholarship as well. Some discuss students' faith as a potential hindrance to academic writing and thinking (Bleich qtd in Hairston, "Diversity" 182; Perkins 605), and others critique that view, challenging the "intellectual distrust" that many academics harbor toward Christian students (Stenberg 271) and asserting the academic benefits of helping students to "articulate their commitments" and determine how those commitments relate to intellectual inquiry (Chapell 49; Vander Lei and Fitzgerald 189).

Still others comment on how little attention the issue of Christianity and religious identity has received in composition scholarship, and they call for more careful consideration of how religion and spirituality affect the field and the classroom (Hansen 27; Vander Lei 8; Wallace 518). The 2005 book *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, edited by Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Lenore Kyburz, takes up the task of reflecting on how religious identity affects pedagogical decisions, student-instructor relationships, and institutional mission. Five of the fourteen essays in this book draw from the author's experience with a Christian student in the classroom to frame at least part of their discussion (Smart; Miller and Santos; Montesano and Roen; Peters; and Cain).¹⁹ The work of these authors makes clear that the questions surrounding students' use of religious discourses in the writing classroom are complicated, frustrating, sometimes frightening—and of great significance to composition instructors and scholars.

Conversations Surrounding and Influencing Christian Discourses

In this section I highlight two books—one written by a well-known rhetorician and composition scholar (Sharon Crowley), the other written by an undergraduate journalism major (Abby Nye)—to demonstrate how composition courses can be influenced by the world(s) outside of them. In this case I am arguing that composition courses are shaped in part by the ways in which students and academics talk (or don't talk) about religious identity beyond the classroom walls. While these two texts may not be the only ones of their kind, they are unique in the ways they take on the relationship of Christianity and intellectualism. These texts represent somewhat extreme positions, but they are positions that resonate with readers. *Toward a Civil Discourse* won the 2008 CCCC Outstanding Book Award. *Fish out of Water*, just a few years old, has already been picked up by churches to be distributed to high school seniors, and has been met with significant praise from various Christian communities. This level of critical and

¹⁹ Two other authors (Hansen and Downs) discuss experiences with LDS (Latter Day Saints) students. Though LDS often labels itself a Christian denomination, I have excluded it here because it is rarely recognized as Christian by other, more "mainstream" denominations. It should be noted, however, that the difficulties experienced by the instructors in these essays are quite similar to those described by instructors working with "traditional" Christian students.

popular reception makes them important texts to consider when contemplating the competing discourses that come into play in composition courses.

Two Texts, Two Versions of the Truth

Sharon Crowley's book, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, is an important text for the way it documents some of the cultural tensions between liberalism and Christian fundamentalism.²⁰ She claims that these two discourses dominate the "discursive climate" of American life, and writes that "the central point of contention between adherents of these discourses involves the place of religious and moral values in civic affairs" (2, 3). Crowley notes a general unwillingness to engage in argument in American culture, and points to the significance of disagreement, debate, and resolution in working through contentious political and social issues (16). According to Crowley, Americans suffer from the "invisibility of rhetoric" and from not knowing that "it is possible for anyone to find arguments other than those that rehearse exhausted canards and follow well-worn paths" (26). Crowley claims that democracy itself is at stake in making rhetorical invention more widely accessible.

The dominance of liberalism and Christian discourses, she notes, makes it difficult to find common ground on which to engage in true debate, especially since the two discourses start from different concepts of argument itself. She offers up "the ancient art of rhetoric as a potential anodyne to this situation, in the hope that rhetorical invention may be able to negotiate the deliberative impasse that seems to have locked American public discourse into repetition and vituperation" (3).

To define fundamentalist thought, Crowley borrows William Connelly's take on the concept. He describes fundamentalism as a:

general imperative to assert an absolute, singular, ground of authority; to ground your own identity and allegiances in this unquestionable source; to define political issues in a vocabulary of God, morality, or nature that invokes such a

²⁰ Throughout her book, Crowley conflates notions of apocalypticism, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and general Christianity. Though she makes distinctions at certain points, she seems to gloss over those distinctions at others. Despite her stated focus on apocalypists, then, it is very difficult to get a firm grasp on her terminology and its implications. As I discuss her text here, I am doing my best to represent her work accurately, but I have to acknowledge my uncertainty as I employ "fundamentalist" and "apocalypticist."

certain, authoritative source' in which believers ground 'their identity and allegiances' (qtd on 12).²¹

One of the drawbacks of fundamentalism, Crowley writes, is that "fundamentalist adherents of ideologies project vices defined by their preferred system of belief onto those who adhere to other systems" (13). In addition, fundamentalist arguments begin from a set of truths held to be universal.

In contrast to her definition of fundamentalist thought, Crowley defines liberalism as an ideology that stems from Enlightenment thought, prizing empirically based reason and extolling the virtues of tolerance and rationality (15). One consequence of such an ideology is that liberals tend not to consider their motivating desires and values, which Crowley points out as a difficulty in engaging in arguments about how citizens should conduct themselves (42). Despite this caveat, Crowley claims that "tolerance ordinarily restrains liberals from characterizing those who oppose them as enemies" (16).²²

Crowley makes a number of important points about the discourses of Christianity (especially of the fundamentalist variety) and of liberalism (which is dominant in academe). Of particular interest to me is the language that Crowley uses to define liberals and Christians and their discursive goals and practices, because her language constructs particular images of these groups and their discourses, and casts those images in opposition to each other. It is only one possible way of casting Christian and liberal discourses, but it is significant because it is a powerful and potentially very convincing view of them. That power and potential, combined with Crowley's regard in the fields of rhetoric and composition, lend a lot of weight to the discursive picture she presents.

In the following paragraphs, I highlight some of the particular words and phrases she uses in her discussion of Christianity and liberalism, and look at how these rhetorical choices shape her argument, and the way a reader is encouraged to respond to each

²¹ From this perspective, "any belief system, including liberalism, can be adhered to with fundamentalist intensity" (12).

²² This line, perhaps more than any other line in the book, reveals how passionately committed to liberalism Crowley is. Scholarship, media, and informal exchanges are full of examples of people on all sides of political and social issues and who come from every perspective being willing to demonize those with whom they disagree. For example, those who generally prize rationality and tolerance may still be inclined to characterize former President Bush as "evil." At no point does Crowley claim to be objective in her approach, however. While she offers certain critiques of liberalism, she makes no secret of leaning far more in its direction than towards Christian fundamentalism.

discourse. The language she uses both describes the ideological tensions between Christian fundamentalist and liberal discourses and *creates* a particular way of viewing these discourses. In other words, her terminology is “a *reflection* of reality” but also “by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (Burke 45, emphasis original). Crowley’s choices are significant because they provide insight into the rhetorical situation one faces when trying to sort out the interactions of competing discourses. The perspective of the one analyzing competing discourses is always present and influential, for instance, and any definition of discourse(s) will necessarily grow out of and reflect ideological biases.

Crowley initially focuses on “apocalypticist” Christians, a group she describes as holding to a few distinct beliefs: a belief in the Bible’s inerrancy, belief in a catastrophic “end times” in which a group of elect followers will be saved, and belief in salvation through human effort (14, 106).²³ Apocalypticists, Crowley writes, want to restore Biblical values to American political life, and wish the Bible to be the foundation of social, political, and cultural norms and decisions. They believe in “a literal second coming of Jesus Christ,” the Rapture,²⁴ and a final judgment. The political ideology founded by such beliefs, Crowley claims, involves the desire to see Biblical values infused into American law and social policies.²⁵

Liberalism, on the other hand, comes with the fundamental values of freedom, tolerance, privacy, reason, the rule of law, and equality (5). Liberals, according to

²³ This last listed belief is a bit puzzling, and there is little explanation to go along with it. Salvation through human effort is anathema to traditional Biblical Christianity, which teaches that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ and God’s grace in providing that means of salvation (Romans 9:32, 11:6; Ephesians 2:9). Crowley may be referring to the Biblical imperative to spread Christianity, and to “do good works” (Ephesians 2:10), but her description of this particular belief does not seem to match up with fundamentalist theology. She does, at one point, note the fundamentalist belief in salvation through Christ (112), and contrasts it to churches that teach salvation through works, but it is unclear (here and at many other points) whether or not she is treating fundamentalist Christianity as distinct from apocalypticism.

²⁴ Crowley defines the Rapture as “the ascent of those who are saved into heaven” at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and notes that apocalypticists believe that this ascent will happen “either prior to or during the tribulation, a period of worldwide devastation and suffering” (7).

²⁵ Crowley is perplexed by apocalypticists’ concern with earthly matters, since they believe that they could be “snatched up to heaven at any time” (8), but the relationship of concern for the world (for the people in it, in particular) and concern for the eternal is not as mutually exclusive as she seems to think. Though the Bible does establish an imperative to keep oneself separate from the temptations of the world (Galatians 6:14; Colossians 2:20; I Peter 1:1)—the imperative to do good works in the world and to affect change in the world is also established quite clearly in the Bible (Matthew 5:13-14, 25:40; Acts 20:35; Galatians 6:9), which, as Crowley states on numerous occasions, is the foundational text for this group of Christians.

Crowley, tend to assume that “rational people operate with a kind of understanding that is relatively free of motivation by desire, interest, or life situation” (42).²⁶ Liberal rhetoricians aim to overcome arguments based in passion with appeals to understanding, but Crowley notes the difficulty of this approach, namely that those who have been taught intolerance—especially from a young age—are not likely be moved by empirical reasoning.

It is here that Crowley makes one of her most significant rhetorical moves. While she never explicitly calls fundamentalist Christians “irrational,” they are frequently cast as such by comparison or implication. In her claim about liberal rhetoric noted in the previous paragraph, for instance, she contrasts liberals’ reliance on “understanding” to Christians’ argumentative dependence on “passion”—a dichotomy that places liberals on the side of *reason* and Christians on the side of *emotion*. As with similar comparisons once made (and still made, less frequently) between men and women, respectively, this move positions Christians as the weaker and less reliable side of the coin—they do not have intellectual control over their beliefs and are not capable of arguing from a position of reason. “[B]elievers,” Crowley claims, “have little incentive to examine their beliefs unless they encounter critical discourse that they can both hear and grasp,” though she does not explain how this applies merely to believers and not to most humans (12).

Crowley acknowledges that the “liberal depiction of tolerant deliberation is itself a belief, part of an ideology that rigorously excludes those who value other sorts of proof, such as gut feelings” (44). This statement nods to the ideological framework of liberalism, and expresses Crowley’s concern of “elitist exclusionism,” but it also reinforces liberalism as the more rational, and even the morally superior ideology (for who is going to argue against “tolerant deliberation”?). It presents tolerant deliberation as an explicitly *liberalist* value and goal. Christians, on the other hand, rely on “gut feelings.”

Crowley does, however, make a number of important points about how competing discourses might communicate more effectively, the most significant of which for the purposes of this study is the notion that productive argument is not possible without

²⁶ Crowley is careful to note that she is using “liberal” in a broad sense, and in connection to the definition of “liberalism” she provides, though she acknowledges that “liberal” is often used strictly in contrast to “conservative” and is also invoked as shorthand for “free-thinking, immoral elitist” (6).

locating common points of agreement, at least in terms of argument itself. She writes that “[t]he point of ethical rhetorical exchange is never to shut down argumentative possibilities but to generate all the positions that are available and articulable in a given moment and situation” (56). In order to foster this kind of exchange, debating parties would likely have to expand their notion of what constitutes the “argumentative possibilities.”

I want to juxtapose Crowley’s text with another recent book written by a Christian undergraduate student at a midsize, public, Midwestern university, entitled *Fish Out of Water: Surviving and Thriving as a Christian on a Secular Campus*, because this text offers a very different perspective on Christian discourses. I suspect that Crowley would characterize the author, Abby Nye, as a fundamentalist, though Nye never explicitly defines herself as a particular type of Christian.

“I’d expected an uphill climb at a secular university,” Nye writes in her Introduction, “but what I didn’t expect was open hostility and ridicule” (10). She details her freshman year experiences, beginning with Welcome Week (fall orientation). Welcome Week, Nye says, offered a powerful “indoctrination into moral relativism” and implied the mandate to “[c]heck your provincial, outdated religious beliefs at the door” (23). Nye experienced Welcome Week as a planned exercise in groupthink, and notes a lack of critical thought and room for dissent and debate.

Nye’s characterization of the people running the orientation workshops is interesting when compared to Crowley’s characterization of fundamentalists. In this scenario, the liberal academics (rather than Crowley’s “believers”) are the ones who “have little incentive to examine their beliefs unless they encounter critical discourse that they can both hear and grasp” (Crowley 12), and there is no mention of how the author herself is resisting discourses that challenges her beliefs. In both texts, the stubbornly insulated group is contrasted to those who yearn for critical debate—on the one hand, liberals and liberal rhetoricians; on the other, students like Nye, who “expected in-depth discussions, the free exchange of ideas, lively debate” and were disappointed at its absence (24). The competition between discourses is evident: it seems impossible for *both* of these characterizations to be entirely accurate, though both Crowley and Nye strongly imply the broad generalizability of their claims.

Nye offers this advice for Christian students as they prepare for life beyond Welcome Week at a secular institution:

You won't survive on a secular campus by simply being well versed on world views and different philosophies of thought. A good background on naturalism, relativism, pantheism, Marxism, communism, nihilism, and existentialism, is certainly desirable, but if you don't know how to handle yourself when you're under attack for being "judgmental" and "intolerant," you can forget about using what you know about the "isms." The most critical defensive play on a college campus today is the ability to deflect the labels "judgmental" and "intolerant" (9).

Both Crowley and Nye recognize the key role played by the notion of tolerance in relation to Christian discourses. Nye claims tolerance as a Biblical concept; Crowley claims it as a liberal value. Neither author argues that only religious or non-religious people can be tolerant, but each author casts tolerance as *primarily* the property of her preferred ideological system. The way the authors position tolerance both suggests the superiority of their own discourses, and suggests deficiencies in the other.

Nye read Dinesh D'Souza's *Letters to a Young Conservative* before attending college, and she leans on it heavily in her second chapter, entitled "Behind Closed Doors," in which she sounds warnings that something secretive and deviant is at work in collegiate classrooms.²⁷ She agrees with D'Souza that departments in the humanities, such as English, are much more problematic than the hard sciences. Her comments (via D'Souza) on the nature of the humanities are striking:

the place I ran into significant problems was in the English department. This seems to be fairly typical, as it is easier to inject personal opinion and subjective values into classes that lend themselves to interpretation . . . D'Souza says because conservatives tend to be practical people—they emphasize what works—they are 'usually concentrated in economics or the hard sciences. The reason has to do with the conservative bent toward practicality: equations that add up, theories that can be tested, and so on. By contrast, liberals prefer such fields as sociology and literary criticism because in these areas their theoretical perspective never has to meet the test of reality' (40).

Here we have a complete reversal of Crowley's representation of some Christians as incapable of rational argument. According to Nye (via D'Souza), *liberals* are incapable

²⁷ Her use of the D'Souza text can be seen as reinforcing the "Christian = conservative" stereotype, which is a rather reductive portrayal of Christian thinking. Several student participants in this study attempt to challenge/complicate this stereotype (discussed in detail in Chapter 4).

of thinking rationally, and flock to the humanities to hatch theories that never have to “meet the test of reality.” The texts have reached a descriptive (and discursive) impasse. What Nye and Crowley have in common is their desire for a new kind of rhetorical exchange, but neither author appears to have much faith in their “opponents’” ability or willingness to change.

In their books, Crowley and Nye offer their own portrayals of how religion operates in society and academia, and their portrayals may be contributing to anxiety within the classroom. Composition instructors, if they have read texts like Crowley’s, may enter the classroom thinking that Christians (and thus Christian students) are intolerant and irrational and will pose problems in the classroom. Christian students, already entering college with a Christian worldview that may be at odds with standard academic practices and beliefs, may feel added anxiety about being brainwashed by their professors if they have read texts like Nye’s. This is not to say that texts of this kind necessarily predetermine student-instructor relationships, but rather that the ways in which they approach and describe Christian discourses in relation to more “academic” discourses have the potential to shape students’ and instructors’ perspectives.

Implications of this Study

Religion’s long and troubled relationship to higher education, its powerful social and cultural influences, and its ability to evoke strong emotion in both adherents and skeptics contribute to the multiplicity of ways that Christian discourses operate in the composition classroom. In particular, awareness of the tenuous historical relationship between religion and higher education is crucial, as any contemporary efforts to acknowledge and understand Christian discourses in composition courses will be carried out within the context of this contested relationship.

My research is just such an effort to acknowledge and understand. This study is intended to detect sites of tension and competition among the discourses of Christianity and composition (keeping in mind that some of these tensions are likely products of the historical conflicts documented in this chapter) and place those discourses in conversation.

By interviewing and surveying both composition instructors and Christian students, and by putting this data in conversation with the emerging scholarship on Christianity and composition, I have developed a clearer sense of where some of these competing discourses are clashing most sharply, and of how a deep analysis of these discourses can reveal the assumptions and fears behind them. This study aims to make the discomfort that some Christian students experience in the composition classroom more visible, and to provide instructors and scholars with new ways of thinking about and approaching difficulties with these students. In addition, this study illuminates how Christian students and composition instructors are defining the work of composition, and how their definitions contribute to conflicts in the student-instructor relationship.

Finally, if composition instructors have access to the ways that a larger group of instructors are constructing Christian students and thinking about how religious discourses do or do not belong in the classroom, and if they also see the ways in which particular Christian students are constructing themselves and their instructors, the issues they have with these students become part of a much larger conversation. By making this larger conversation available to instructors, this study could both validate some of their concerns and frustrations, and challenge them to think more critically about how their pedagogy accounts for religious discourses and diversity. Such reflection may make it possible for instructors to imagine new ways of engaging with Christian students and to develop strategies for navigating the competing discourses at work in their classrooms.

Chapter Two

APPROACHING STUDENT AND INSTRUCTOR DISCOURSES CRITICALLY: A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore and describe discourses of Christianity and composition that are at work in writing courses at one large, public university, with the goals of illuminating key facets of Christian and composition discourses and addressing certain tensions between them.

The data brings together narratives from both composition instructors and a subset of Christian composition students in a way that highlights different ways that instructors and students view the relationships of religious discourses to the discourses of composition. Interview and survey data provide both a broad sense of some of the competing discourses of instructors and students and a more focused look at particular problems that instructors and students face in their writing courses.

I have chosen the research design described in this chapter because I think it best allows these competing discourses to be made visible and to be placed side by side for analysis. Interaction with the people employing the competing discourses under investigation is a good way to get a sense of how these discourses are used and what they mean to those who use them. I agree with Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman that “one cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions—their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds” (57). A qualitative study gives me the opportunity to listen to, watch, and respond to participants as they make sense of their experiences.

As I designed this study, I was highly aware of Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln’s statement that all research is “guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (13). My methodology is helpful not in eliminating or even pushing aside the personal beliefs and feelings that guide this

work, but in reining them in so that they are merely guides and not dictators. Though my application of discourse analysis necessarily invokes my own biases and ways of seeing the world, the larger qualitative design—with its parameters of validity and ethical research practice—constrains and challenges my own interpretive tendencies.

A qualitative study allows participants—in this case composition students and instructors at the University of the Midwest—to speak for themselves and to describe lived experiences; in other words, it allows for the messiness of human experience, and for that experience to be described and discussed by multiple voices. Qualitative research also fits quite comfortably with the kinds of questions composition scholars often seek to answer, and compositionists have long been engaged in what Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kelly Donnell term “practitioner inquiry,” a form of scholarship in which “the practitioner is researcher, the professional context is the research site, and practice itself is the focus of study” (503). Though compositionists don’t often evoke this kind of terminology, much composition scholarship involves reflection on the author’s own practice, often drawing from experience with particular students or classes.

The student-centered nature of composition studies and the value placed on critical pedagogical practice make a study that calls on both students and instructors to reflect on aspects of their participation in the writing course a fitting contribution to composition scholarship. In particular, I hope that this study will add to the emerging body of work that relates to religion in the writing classroom.

What Are the Research Questions Guiding this Study?

This study is driven by a set of understandings about the relationship of Christianity to higher education, the relatively small body of work dealing with the presence of religious discourses/identities in composition courses, and the ways in which writing instructors are encountering Christian discourses in their writing classrooms. Also driving this study is an assumption that exploring the relationships between Christian discourses and the discourses of composition—even at just one local-institutional site—carries significant implications for students’ participation in

coursework, for instructors' pedagogy, and for future scholarship related to religious discourses and their place in the public university writing classroom.

Though relationships between Christian discourses and the discourses of composition might be explored in numerous different ways, the data collected through surveys and a series of interviews allowed me to both fine-tune my research questions as I gathered information and to engage in analysis shaped by student and instructor responses. Anselm Straus and Juliet Corbin write that qualitative research involves a "balance between science and creativity," and my attempts to strike that delicate balance kept my design mobile and open to adjustment as the study progressed (13).

Eventually I chose to narrow my focus to two particular issues: how these two groups tend to think and talk about the other, and how both groups discuss the work of composition and the role that religious discourses might play in that work.

My study is guided by the following research question:

What competing discourses of Christianity and composition are operating in college composition courses?

By investigating this research question, I hope to address the following two questions:

What are some of the implications of these competing discourses for composition courses?²⁸

How can these competing discourses, and the tensions they create, inform the teaching of composition?

What are the Sources of Data?

Context of the Study

The context of this study is a large, public, state university that enrolls both undergraduate and graduate students. The campus where I conducted research

²⁸ This question comes with a series of related sub-questions: In what ways do they show up in composition courses? In what ways is their competition acknowledged, silenced, or negotiated? How do they impact classroom dynamics? How do they affect student writing, student-teacher relationships, and assessment?

(henceforth called the University of the Midwest, or UM) is the flagship campus of a state system totaling three campuses. In the Fall 2007 semester, the three campuses, combined, enrolled a total of 56,531 students and employed 9,013 instructional staff (including Graduate Student Instructors).

The English Department Writing Program (EDWP) at the University of the Midwest coordinates the general studies composition courses, which consist primarily of 100-level composition courses, but also include 200-level composition courses, a 300-level course, and an advanced 400-level course. A first-year writing course is required of all students and the majority of students fulfill this requirement by taking English 125: College Writing. In addition, EDWP offers several sections of English 124: Writing and Literature each semester, which also fulfills the requirement. A small number of students fulfill the requirement by taking courses offered elsewhere in the University, such as History 195, Classical Civilization 101, Comparative Literature 122, Great Books 191, Lloyd Hall Scholars Program 125, and Engineering 100.

Student Surveys

For both students and instructors, I viewed surveys as an opportunity to see the “distribution of characteristics, attitudes, or beliefs” that participants exhibited (Marshall and Rossman 129). Marshall and Rossman call surveys a “mode of inquiry for making inferences about a larger group of people from data drawn on a relatively small number of individuals from that group” (130). Though I worked with relatively small groups of students and instructors, surveys allowed me to understand and describe these groups more broadly than data from in-depth interviews.

According to Michael Patton, the “purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the point of view of the other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories” (21). Apart from one question requesting specific information about which writing course(s) students had taken, survey questions were open-ended and invited students to draw from their own experiences and to share their opinions on the

relationship of their religious beliefs to their academic writing. (See Appendix A for samples of student survey responses.)

In addition to the qualitative data provided by students' responses, the survey data offers quantitative data as well. This quantitative information is useful in shaping my interpretation of the data. Knowing how many Christian students use term X to describe the ways they imagine instructors think of them, or what percentage of this select group of students decided to self-identify as Christian in their composition courses, for example, allows me to form hypotheses about which problems and issues are most significant to respondents.

Attached to the front of the surveys was a survey consent form, which informed students of the voluntary nature of the survey, of their right to skip any questions they did not care to answer, and of the fact that participation in the survey would not benefit or harm their academic record in any way. The form also provided students with my contact information and contact information for the IRB. Students were instructed not to sign the form in order to protect their anonymity.

The survey itself began with a brief summary of my research project and my reasons for wanting to hear from Christian students. Students were invited to contact me with any questions about my work, and I also invited questions at the time of distribution. The survey questions were as follows:

- What composition courses have you taken (or are you currently taking) at UM (English 124, 125, 225, 229, 325)?
- How do you think writing instructors think about Christian students? What gives you this impression?
- Did you identify as Christian in your writing course(s)? Why or why not?
- How did you identify yourself, if you did? (in your writing, during class discussion, during office hours with your instructor, etc.)
- What kinds of responses, if any, did your Christian identity elicit from your instructor?
- Do you think that it's appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing?

- Have you ever written a paper for a college writing course about your faith or from a Christian perspective? If so, how was that choice received by the instructor?
- Would you be willing to participate in a half-hour follow-up interview for this study? (This would involve meeting with me in my office and talking a bit more about your experiences as a Christian student.) If so, please write your name and email address on a separate piece of paper, in order to keep surveys anonymous. Please also feel free to email me at hthomson@umich.edu if you'd like to do an interview.

Instructor Surveys

Instructor surveys were similar in structure and purpose to student surveys. The key difference between the two was distribution method: while students were handed surveys in person, instructors received their surveys in their campus mailboxes. I distributed a survey to all of the instructors who were teaching composition in the Winter 2007 term (approximately 120 instructors).

Like the student surveys, these surveys included a consent form to inform instructors of the voluntary nature of the survey and their rights as respondents. The consent form was identical to the one students received, except for the inclusion of an assurance that participation would neither harm nor benefit instructors' *professional* status/standing, in addition to their academic standing. The survey included a brief description of my research project, and instructors were invited to contact me via email if they had any questions about my work or about participation. Survey questions were as follows:

- Are you a GSI or a lecturer?²⁹
- Which courses have you taught at UM?
- How long have you been teaching composition?
- What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Christian student?³⁰

²⁹ A lecturer is a non-tenure-track faculty member who teaches 2-3 courses per semester.

³⁰ This question underwent a series of changes. I wanted instructors' instinctive, gut reactions to "Christian student"—not the description they'd give in a formal setting, or what they'd say if they sat and thought for a while, but just the words/ideas that they tended to associate with Christian students, whether or not they thought that those associations were "correct" or "true." Originally, the question was "What comes to mind when you think of a Christian student?" but multiple readers had difficulty understanding the purpose of

- Have you ever had a self-identified Christian student in one of your writing courses? If so, what do you recall about that student and their work?
- Have you ever had a problem or conflict with a Christian student that involved that student's religious belief system? Please describe this experience.
- Have you ever had a Christian student incorporate their faith into their writing for the course? If so, what was the result?
- Do you think that it is appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing? Please explain.
- Would you be willing to participate in a half-hour follow-up interview for this study? If so, please provide your name and contact information on the attached sheet. Then detach that sheet and return it to my mailbox separately.

Marshall and Rossman note that surveys “facilitate research in politically and ethically sensitive areas” (130), and I intended these surveys as a kind of forum for instructors’ views that might otherwise not be heard. For instance, if an instructor tended to think very negative things when confronted with the term “Christian student,” he or she might not be willing to share that reaction publicly, or in a face-to-face interview. The survey allowed instructors to write honestly and openly about their experiences with Christian students without having to worry about the potential impact on their reputation or their relationships with others. (See Appendix B for samples of instructor survey responses.)

The survey gave me both quantitative and qualitative data to work with, and instructors’ responses to open-ended questions gave me a sense of the kinds of language that instructors use to talk about their Christian students and to describe conflicts that they’ve had with these students.

Student Interviews

After survey data had been collected, I conducted targeted, individual interviews with seven students who had either volunteered to participate in an interview at the time

the question. I played around with narrower versions of the question, and finally decided on “characteristics,” as it doesn’t have strongly positive or negative connotations, and makes clear that I am looking for words and phrases describing a person.

of their survey, or who had been referred to me by other instructors. Student participants were all enrolled in courses at UM at the time of their interview, and all had taken their required writing course(s) prior to the semester in which I interviewed them. Five were female and two were male. Five had taken multiple composition courses; the other two had taken the first-year writing course only. Class rank ranged from sophomore to senior, and students represented a wide range of disciplinary focus. All students were of traditional college age.

I started each interview with a “grand tour” question. As described by Mary Brenner, a grand tour question asks the informant to speak broadly about the topic at hand; this helps the researcher identify issues of importance to the informant and choose follow-up (or “minitour”) questions that build on the foundation laid by the grand tour question (358).

In this case, the grand tour question for both students and instructors was *Why were you interested in talking more about this issue?* With no monetary or other incentive attached to interview participation, I could assume that each informant was motivated to participate by a desire to discuss Christianity as it related to their work in writing courses, and my grand tour question allowed participants to articulate this interest and set the stage for the remainder of the interview.

Interviews were conversational in nature, and my intent in conducting the interviews was to allow participants to guide the conversation as much as possible. My approach was in keeping with Marshall and Rossman’s image of an interview in which:

the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses . . . the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it (108).

To that end, I allowed participants’ responses to dictate follow-up questions and turns in conversation as much as possible, and did not enter the interviews with a list of specific questions to be addressed.

Student Interviewees

Below are the pseudonyms of the seven interviewed students, along with a brief description of each participant. These “introductions” are meant to familiarize the reader with names that will appear throughout this study, as well as to highlight any special factors that contributed to my analysis of a participant’s interview data. As noted previously, all student interviewees identified as Christian, and all were of traditional college age.

Jamie was a sophomore psychology major at the time of her interview. She’d taken the first-year writing course the previous year. In that course, she’d written a research paper in which she’d drawn from the Bible as a primary source; she discussed the process of revising that paper at length during her interview, and that process is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Grant was a senior brain behavior and cognitive sciences (biopsychology) major at the time of his interview. He had taken the first-year writing course during his freshman year, and had taken an additional composition course the previous semester.

Isabelle was a junior neuroscience major at the time of her interview. She had taken first-year writing during her freshman year, and another composition course as a sophomore. Isabelle was a former student of mine who’d kept in occasional touch with me. I knew that she enjoyed talking about her faith; for this reason, and because a year had passed since she’d been my student, I included her in this study. The risk of including her was that she would most likely not speak critically of me or of my course. Nevertheless, Isabelle provided rich interview data that I felt compelled to include in the study, even as I acknowledge that her interview data might have included more discussion of my course or my pedagogy had she been interviewed by someone else. Because we had had an amicable student-instructor relationship, she seemed to talk freely and easily about her experiences, despite having been my student.

Holly was a junior history major at the time of her interview. She had taken first-year writing and an additional composition course during her freshman year.

Quinn was a senior economics major at the time of his interview. He had taken the first-year writing course during his freshman year, and had taken an additional composition course the previous semester.

Rebecca was a junior art major at the time of her interview. She had taken the first-year writing course during her freshman year, and had taken an additional composition course as a sophomore.

Theresa was a junior social sciences concentrator at the time of her interview. She had taken the first-year writing course during her freshman year.

Instructor Interviews

Seven instructors expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview when they filled out their survey, and I conducted interviews with each of them during the same semester in which I was conducting student interviews. Instructor interviewees included three lecturers and four GSIs. Five participants were female, two were male, and all had taught writing courses at UM for at least two years.

As with student interviews, I began with the grand tour question and allowed instructors to shape the interview according to their interests and experiences. I thought it reasonable to assume that instructors who volunteered to participate in an interview had some level of investment in the questions raised by my study. Interviews targeted a self-selected group of instructors who were willing to dedicate their time to discussing their experiences with Christian students, and the conversational interview style allowed these instructors to talk freely about whatever seemed most significant to them in relation to those experiences.

It is possible that this group of interviewees is not representative of the entire EDWP instructor population. For example, the views expressed by this sample may not be reflective of the full range of opinions and perceptions held by the broader instructor population. However, my recruitment efforts reached out to every EDWP instructor, and I believe that this recruitment strategy gave me the best possible chance of drawing forth a diverse group of interviewees.

As I conducted the interviews with both students and instructors, I was wary of “treat[ing] interview questions and answers as passive filters towards some truths about people” (Silverman 90). Even as I sought to make connections from instructor interviews to composition pedagogy more broadly, or from student interviews to the experiences of Christian students in the writing classroom more broadly, I strove to keep in mind that each interview is itself a construction of reality rather than a mere representation or reflection of it. As David Silverman writes, “[A]ny person can describe themselves (or be described) in a multiplicity of ways” (113). Each interviewee made conscious and unconscious choices about what to say and what not to say, and how best to represent themselves given the context of our meeting and their perception of my study. I, in turn, made conscious and unconscious choices about what questions to ask, what notes to take, and how to respond to each participant. (See Appendix C for a sample instructor interview.)

Instructor Interviewees

Below are the pseudonyms of the seven interviewed instructors, along with a brief description of each participant. I have also noted any special factors that contributed to my analysis of a participant’s interview data. If participants noted their religious/nonreligious affiliation, I have noted it here; they were not asked to identify themselves in this way, but some of the instructors chose to do so.

Paige had been teaching writing as a GSI at UM for three years at the time of her interview, and had also taught writing at a religiously affiliated university prior to beginning her doctoral study. She identified herself as nonreligious, and as unfamiliar with the Bible.

Colin taught writing as a GSI at UM for one year, and had been teaching writing as a lecturer at UM for six years at the time of his interview.

Adrienne taught writing as a GSI at UM for two years, and had been teaching writing as a lecturer at UM for two years at the time of her interview.

Luke had been teaching as a GSI at UM for two years at the time of his interview. Prior to his doctoral study, he had taught writing at a university in his home country. Much of Luke’s interest in the subject seemed to lay in the differences between

approaches to Christian discourses in the two countries, as well as in how the more institutionalized religion of his home country shaped education there. While these ideas were compelling and informative, much of Luke's interview could not be effectively put in context with other data. For this reason, Luke appears less frequently in the study than the other instructors.

Nadia taught writing as a GSI at UM for one year, and had taught writing as a lecturer at UM for a total of four years at the time of her interview. The four years were broken up by a two-year stint as a teacher at a Quaker high school. Nadia noted how working at a Quaker school made talking about spirituality seem very natural to her, because it was integrated into all of the classes there.

Gina had been teaching writing as a GSI at UM for six years at the time of her interview. She identified herself as Christian, though she noted that she is also liberal, and that traditional Christian students would likely not consider her beliefs "Christian."

Yvonne had been teaching writing as a GSI at UM for two years at the time of her interview. She identified as nonreligious, in that she is not affiliated with any religion and does not practice any particular faith, but noted that she does think and talk about spiritual matters fairly regularly.

How was the Data Analyzed?

The first step in data analysis was to gather the data into useful forms. Surveys were available to me as separate documents, of course, but I also compiled student survey responses and instructor survey responses so that I could more easily identify patterns across responses and note any recurrent uses of words and phrases. For example, having all answers to the instructor survey question *What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Christian student?* in one place let me see that six instructors had written the word *conservative* and multiple instructors had included the words *sometimes judgmental* and *not very open-minded*; this collection of responses contributed to a sense of how instructors as a group tended to think about Christian students. The compiled responses also allowed me to identify contradictions or differences between responses.

Interviews were transcribed (by me and by a third party service) so that I could analyze interview data in written form. Because this study did not focus on grammatical structures, pronunciation, or dialect, transcriptions did not include markers for vowel sounds, stretched out syllables, or nonstandard pronunciation. Transcriptions were verbatim, however, and showed repetition, pauses, and sentence fragments, which were important to gathering information about where respondents had hedged, had difficulty articulating an idea, and so forth.

Interview data, when quoted in this study, is presented as it was spoken, with one exception. I have excluded the use of the discourse particle “like” in both instructor and student interview data because its inclusion risked invoking some readers’ tendency to view this usage as an indication of the speaker’s inarticulateness, poor education, or lack of intelligence (Dailey-O’Cain 63). Both instructors and students used “like” in this way, but usage was more frequent in students’ interviews. My removal of the discourse particle “like” is meant as an indicator of care for the way that participants are represented (Johnstone 21-22), and does not significantly affect analysis of student or instructor discourses.³¹

Judith Butler’s articulation (noted in Chapter 1) of language *as* action and its consequences (8) has been extraordinarily valuable for this project, especially as I analyzed data. The process of teaching, writing, and responding involves more than transactions of words and paper—Kathleen Blake Yancey claims that “[w]hat we ask students to do is who we ask them to be” (739). She highlights the constitutive and transformative nature of language here, and I tried to keep these notions of language foregrounded as I analyzed the data collected in my study, and particularly as I identified and located some of the competing discourses of Christianity and composition operating in composition courses.

Students and instructors were *doing* something beyond the act of putting pen to paper or verbalizing words as they filled out surveys and responded to interview questions. Hugh Mehan writes, “Each mode of representation defines the person making the representation and constitutes the group of people” (242). A significant part of what I

³¹ It is possible that removing “like” also removed some instances of hedging from the data. I have decided to accept that risk because I think that there are greater risks associated with the inclusion of “like.”

was looking for as I analyzed the data was how each group constituted the other, and, consequently, how each group defined itself.

Discourse Analysis

One of my primary methods for approaching and analyzing data was discourse analysis. As discussed in Chapter 1, I understand discourses as ways of talking, seeing, believing, and valuing that both reflect and construct reality, and discourse analysis allowed me to look closely at discursive acts and form hypotheses about the realities that were reflected and constructed by them. Ellen Barton defines discourse analysis broadly as “the study of the ways that language is organized in texts and contexts.” More specifically, she writes, “discourse analysis can investigate features of language as small and specific as aspects of sentence structure, or it can investigate features of texts and contexts as large and diffuse as genres and sociocultural world views” (57). In my study, this second notion of discourse analysis—as a method for investigating “large and diffuse” features pertaining to worldview—was key.

Discourse analysis allowed me to look for “patterns in the language associated with a particular topic or activity” (Taylor 7)—in this case, the presence of Christian discourses in composition courses—and to connect those patterns to broader questions about the purposes of composition and the ways in which religious identity factors into that purpose. Discourse analysis also allowed me to look closely at individual instructor’s and student’s language that did not fit patterns established in other data or that offered provocative examples of ways in which certain members of each group responded to issues raised in interviews or on surveys.

Take, as an example, the following brief excerpt from an instructor’s (Yvonne) interview transcript. I have marked with italics words and phrases that I would pay particular attention to if I had selected this passage for analysis:

U of M seems to me to go out of its way to really be, while separate, *very accommodating and tolerating of all religions*. So, so that feels *appropriate* to me. But at the same time, *I wasn’t brought up in a very religious environment*, and *I don’t know if I were someone who really did identify as an extremely devout person, I’m not sure*. *I don’t know* how it would feel to me...

In analyzing this segment of Yvonne's interview, I would first note that she begins with a strong evaluative statement about UM's actions toward religion—it is “very accommodating and tolerating,” and Yvonne deems this “appropriate.” Immediately after sharing her perspective on UM, however, Yvonne acknowledges that her own position as someone not brought up in a religious environment and who does not consider herself devout may influence her interpretation. As she considers how an “extremely devout” person might feel, her uncertainty about how that subject position might make her feel about UM becomes clear in her use of “I’m not sure” and two uses of “I don’t know.”

From these observations of Yvonne's language, I could surmise that she recognizes the ways in which background and identity shape one's perspective, and that she is unsure of how devout religious students experience UM. I would also note, as I considered this excerpt in its larger context, that Yvonne's depiction of UM as accommodating to religious belief seems to contradict an earlier statement she made during the interview that “outing” oneself as a Christian was a risky prospect for students.

By attending closely to what students and instructors are *doing* in their interviews and surveys through discourse—how they are constructing the other group and themselves, how they are invoking the norms of various institutions, what they are privileging and what they are dismissing—I can begin to address questions about how these discourses affect students, instructors, and the teaching of writing.

As I worked with the survey and interview data, one of the questions posed by James Gee in *Introduction to Discourse Analysis* was of particular use to me because it addresses the situated nature of discourse and of meaning produced through discourse. Gee asks:

What are the situated meanings of some of the words and phrases that seem important in the situation? (93).

The notion of “situated meanings” is a crucial one for my analysis. All of the meanings at work in participants' discourses are contextually based, and are influenced by the participants' multiple roles, membership in faith and academic communities, specific courses/teachers/students, and by the process of being interviewed or surveyed. In other

words, the stories the data tell reflect more than individual experiences. In my analysis, I tried to remain aware that individuals' stories are always connected to larger academic, religious, social, and political contexts.

Coding

The other primary method for analyzing data was thematic coding. As I began coding the data, I wanted to exhibit Straus and Corbin's ideal of remaining "creative, flexible, and true to the data all at the same time" (16), while concurrently taking into account Keith Grant-Davies' warning that "coding is interpretive, and no interpretation can be considered absolutely correct or valid" (281). To the extent to which it was possible, I tried not to look for anything in particular during my initial phase of interaction with the data, but to leave myself open to any and all possibilities during initial coding.³² As I revisited the data, developed categories, and refined my research questions, I coded more selectively.

In initial coding, I used a process of "open coding," in which I was "breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data" and then making comparisons between these concepts (Straus and Corbin 195). Through open coding, I tried to get a sense of what was going on as students and instructors talked about issues of Christianity and composition, creating codes in response to particular words and phrases that participants were using in connection to religious discourses ("fear," for example) or to their ways of thinking about a particular issue (for example, "instructor beliefs" was a code describing some participants' indications that an instructor's worldview shaped or determined how they responded to students' religious discourses. (See Appendix D for a sample index of an open interview code.)

Along with open coding, I used axial coding to "relate concepts/categories to each other" (Straus and Corbin 198). Axial coding allowed me to take the many concepts formed through open coding and begin connecting them according to higher-level

³² There were anticipated/predictable patterns, of course. I was not surprised, for instance, to see Christian students referred to as politically conservative. Also, even my initial readings of data were inevitably informed by my research questions.

categories. So, for example, I could look at a series of codes from the instructor data and see that they all related to instructors' characterizations of Christian students. Or I could see that a series of codes pertained to the ways that students describe the proper work of the composition course.

In addition to open and axial coding, I used what Straus and Corbin call "microanalysis," to help me "break in to the data" more deeply and take note of passages that seemed particularly telling or perplexing (59). Microanalysis was particularly useful for passages in which a student or instructor told a story about a classroom experience, or in which a participant characterized themselves or others in a troubling way. For example, when I encountered a place in an interview in which an instructor told the story of an experience with a Christian student who expressed views that she found offensive and hurtful, I used microanalysis to focus in on this narrative, to pay attention to its details, and to discover ways in which this particular story related to other data.

Data & Scholarship

As noted in Chapter 1, this study is a hybrid genre, combining an empirical research design and analysis informed by social sciences with analysis of composition scholarship. What this means for data analysis is that while hypotheses and claims are formed based on evidence from collected data, I have sought out connections (and contradictions) between these hypotheses and claims and the claims forwarded by other scholars. For example, when I discuss instructor respondents' statements about Christian students' power and/or vulnerability (see Chapter 3), I put emergent patterns in conversation with scholars who have also commented on issues of power in relation to Christian students or discourses. Doing so allows me to situate my analysis of instructor data in the broader conversations surrounding Christian students and discourses in the writing classroom and in higher education. This integration of data and scholarship strengthens my study as composition research by making this study part of an ongoing scholarly conversation, adding a different kind of empirical data to an area of study that has been grounded largely in anecdotal evidence, and demonstrating how this data both confirms and challenges elements of existing scholarship.

How Were the Participants Recruited?

Instructors

When I refer to “instructors” in this study, I am referring to graduate students and lecturers at the University of the Midwest who were teaching for the English Department Writing Program at the time of survey and interview participation. For the 2005-2006 academic year,³³ all 222 sections of English 125 and 124 (the two first-year composition courses) at the University were taught by graduate student instructors or by lecturers (graduate students taught 66.4% of the sections in Fall 2005 and 67.2% of the sections in Winter 2006). Graduate students and lecturers are not, primarily, the people publishing in composition studies, but they are the ones working in the composition classroom, which is why I have chosen to focus on them in this study.³⁴

Surveys were distributed to instructors’ campus mailboxes, and respondents had the option of returning surveys to my mailbox or sliding them under my office door. Surveys included a tear-off sheet for instructors to provide contact information if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. A total of forty instructors returned the survey (a 30% response rate) and seven participated in follow-up interviews.

An important consideration in soliciting response from writing instructors was the broad range of experience levels represented. Graduate student instructors (GSIs) typically teach only a few terms of composition, and may or may not have much investment in teaching composition. Lecturers may be teaching their third term of composition (a recent MFA graduate would fall into this category), or they may have been teaching multiple sections of composition every semester for over a decade.

In order to factor in the diverse experience levels of the instructors, I included questions regarding their employment status and amount of teaching experience in my initial survey. Of the instructors who responded, 73% were GSIs and 60% had been teaching between one and three years. Though there do not appear to be any compelling

³³ The year prior to data collection. Statistics were not available for the 2006-2007 academic year, but the administrators for the Writing Program informed me that these numbers are typical from year to year.

³⁴ The teaching of first-year composition is done primarily by graduate students, adjunct faculty, or lecturers at most large, public institutions in the United States.

differences between the responses of these GSIs and more experienced instructors (18% had taught for six years or more)—for instance, more experienced instructors did not tend to describe Christian students more positively or negatively than less experienced instructors—the scope of this study is not sufficient to account for the ways in which experience influences perceptions and practice in relation to Christian students/discourses.

Christian students

The student participants in this study are all self-identified Christian students who were enrolled at the University of the Midwest at the time of data collection. Because I wanted to hear from students for whom religious identity was a significant dimension of life at UM, I contacted leaders of Christian student organizations on campus by email and requested permission to address the group for a few minutes during a meeting and distribute a short, voluntary survey.³⁵ In the email, I provided a brief summary of my project, offered to answer any questions that the leader had about my work, and made it clear that my data collection method had been approved by the IRB.

Of the Christian student groups I contacted, four granted me permission to address students at a meeting. Two of the groups were nondenominational, and two were affiliated with particular Protestant denominations. From these groups I collected forty-one student surveys.³⁶ Students who filled out the survey were also invited to participate in a follow-up interview, and those interested provided their contact information on a tear-off sheet originally attached to the survey.

In addition to the recruitment method outlined above, I connected with four student interview participants through their instructors. Several instructors, of their own volition, informed me about former students they had had in their writing courses who

³⁵ I acknowledge that participation in a Christian campus group does not *necessarily* indicate that religious identity is a significant dimension of a student's college life, because the student could have other reasons for joining/participating. I do, however, think it reasonable to assume that these students are more likely than others to identify strongly as Christian, as participation in these groups means that the students sought out religious community and make time for participation in that community's practices.

³⁶ Though I had hoped to collect more student data, several of these groups were small, and the large group happened to have low attendance (according to the leader) on the night I addressed the group. Low numbers may be attributable to the fact that data was collected near the end of the semester, when students tend to have less time for activities outside of their school work.

might be interested in talking with me. I asked them to contact those students and ask if they would be willing to receive an email from me about my research. If students replied in the affirmative, I sent an email explaining my project and invited that student to participate in an interview.

Finally, one interview participant was a former student of mine, who had taken two of my writing courses. She had kept in sporadic contact with me via email since taking the second class a year earlier, which made me feel comfortable approaching her about an interview.

What was My Role as the Researcher?

As I highlight the ideological nature of student and instructor discourses, I must acknowledge the fact that my research and analysis cannot be kept rigidly separate from my own ideologies (Corbin 11; Kelly 34). My membership in particular discourse communities and my particular worldview influence my interactions with participants, my interpretations, and my arguments. I am both a Christian and a composition instructor, and these subject positions operate both as sources of opportunity to interact with and understand my participants, and as sources of constraint due to the always limited perspectives that these subject positions carry with them.

As a Christian, for example, I was familiar with the religious discourses that many student participants brought into their interviews and surveys, and I have been exposed to some of the ways in which Christian communities talk about higher education and think about their role in (or their separation from) intellectualism. I, too, attended a large public university in the Midwest, and I am familiar with some of the uncomfortable situations student participants have faced. I am also relatively well informed when it comes to Christian theology and current cultural movements within Protestant Christianity in the United States. This background knowledge allowed me to ask pertinent follow-up questions, and to understand some of the ways in which Christian students are challenged at the University of the Midwest. My background also means a likely bias toward students who have felt discriminated against for their Christian beliefs.

This is not to overstate my connection to student participants. I am not necessarily the same “kind” of Christian that some of them consider themselves to be—we may well differ on theological and social issues, for instance. Most importantly, their understanding of religion in relation to academic work may be quite different from mine. I do not claim to have a firm grasp on these students’ experiences or on what their Christian identity means to them based on a single survey or interview. My identity as a Christian simply means that I may have a familiarity with participants’ discourses and a point of connection to participants that someone from a different background may not.

The key assumption that carries into my work based on my identity as a Christian, and a Christian student more specifically, is that spirituality and academic/intellectual work can be, and often are, linked. I was aware of this assumption as I designed the study, and I have tried to temper its influence by looking at the question of this connection through scholarship and through the words of student and instructor participants.

My identity as a writing instructor also played a significant role in my research. My position as an instructor—and specifically an instructor at UM—allowed me to understand some of the values and practices central to the discourses of instructor participants. My knowledge of the goals of writing courses at UM and my understanding of composition pedagogy helped me to empathize with the struggles that instructors encountered with Christian students, and to ask pertinent follow-up questions as they discussed these struggles. My knowledge also means that I may exhibit bias toward instructors who encounter students who are resistant to their pedagogical goals or who challenge their instructors in uncomfortable ways, as I have been in these positions myself.

Again, this is not to presume that my own pedagogical goals are identical to all instructor participants, or to claim that I fundamentally understood the experiences and claims of all instructors. What my position as an instructor meant was that I could engage with participants’ discourses in ways that a researcher who was not also a writing instructor (especially at the same institution) may not have been able to do, but also that I had to guard against projecting my own feelings and assumptions as an instructor onto the data.

Reflexivity about my role as researcher contributed to my choices in terms of the validity and ethics of this study. As discussed in the following section, my choices related to communication with participants, member-checking, and triangulation were influenced by my desire to conduct a study grounded in data and in conversation with scholarship, even as I acknowledged my own, inevitable partiality.

What Steps Did I Take to Create an Ethical Study and Establish Trustworthiness?

My first step in designing and conducting an ethical study was to submit my design to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UM. The revision process that I engaged in with the help of an IRB associate ensured that my plans for the study of human subjects had been thoroughly scrutinized by someone protecting the interest of the subjects, and that I had thought through relevant issues of confidentiality, informed consent, and risk.

Survey data was collected anonymously, and interview participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, of their rights to refuse participation at any time, and of my plans for collected data. Each interviewee read and signed a consent form and was given a copy to keep for themselves. Survey participants received a consent form attached to their survey, though they were instructed not to sign it in order to keep their participation anonymous.

By protecting participants' anonymity, I hoped to create situations in which they could speak freely. Of course, asking participants to speak freely comes with certain risks and ethical obligations. Jonas F. Soltis, reflecting on his qualitative research on the ethics of teaching, writes:

the unique relationship of teacher to student created a specific moral situation, one in which the student placed trust in the teacher and had a legitimate expectation . . . of not being taken advantage of or harmed in any way, and, in general, of having his or her own well-being, not the teacher's, function as the guiding value of the enterprise (247).

I was not in the role of "teacher" in relation to the students (or instructors) involved in this study. However, all of the students knew that I teach at the University of the

Midwest, and one was a former student; therefore, it is likely and understandable that these students expected from me what they might expect from a teacher—that I would not take advantage of them, and that I would be looking out for their well-being. Of utmost concern for me was assuring students that they weren't being asked to discuss their religious beliefs so that those beliefs could be mocked or cast as anti-intellectual in my written work. Establishing an atmosphere of trust was crucial not only in eliciting rich data from interviews, but also in making sure that students—a group considered “vulnerable” in research using human subjects—felt comfortable and encountered minimal psychological risk.

Many of the instructors in the EDWP knew me through my position as a Graduate Student Mentor in the year prior to my data collection, and therefore may have had similar expectations because of the sense of camaraderie established between us during my time in that role. Though instructors are not officially considered vulnerable subjects, they incur potential risks in discussing a delicate issue such as religion. As a researcher, I had to create an atmosphere in which instructors felt assured that they were not being judged and that their words would be represented accurately and fairly.³⁷

Throughout data collection, I was careful to be upfront about the study, my interests, my plans for the data collected, and the purposes of my questions, and I gave participants opportunities to ask me questions as well. By making my intentions transparent and by inviting questions from participants, I aimed to help instructors and students feel at ease and feel reassured that they were being treated ethically and with respect.

In addition to making efforts to create an ethical study, I took steps to enhance the validity, or credibility, of my study and of my findings. In Juliet Corbin's discussion of credibility, she argues that credibility:

indicates that findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers', and readers' experiences with a phenomenon but at

³⁷ As Mara Casey and her colleagues explain, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to warn research participants of *all* the possible risks. They write, “To warn all potential research subjects of any possible negative outcomes would be impossible, but even if such outcomes could be anticipated, the value of scholarship would be limited, for it would restrict participants to a very small group of persons with ‘nothing left to lose’” (121).

the same time the explanation is only one of many possible ‘plausible’ interpretations from data (301-2).³⁸

In order to create a study and to develop findings that fit into this model of credibility, I have taken several steps to establish the trustworthiness of my findings, to ensure that my findings reflect participants’ experiences with Christianity and composition, and to acknowledge that any findings I offer are necessarily limited.

Member-checking was an important part of validating my data analysis. I sent an email to each interview participant, asking them to read two brief excerpts from my work that incorporated and analyzed their language. The email reminded the participant of our interview, and informed them of their right to read my work and to object to any use of their interview that they found inaccurate or troubling. I invited them to ask questions, to express points of confusion, to correct me if they thought I’d misinterpreted them, or to elaborate on a point they’d made in their interview.

All seven instructors and two of seven students responded to the member-checking email.³⁹ While some mentioned how jarring it was to see spoken language in print, and made self-deprecating remarks in relation to that language, most participants responded that they were in full agreement with my analysis of their interview data and expressed support for my project. Two instructors questioned my wording regarding their discussion of their own religious identities; member-checking gave them an opportunity to (re)articulate their positions and help me represent them more accurately. One instructor added that he’d been thinking about issues of faith and writing since our interview, and told me about revisions he’d made to his syllabus—this led to an exchange that factored into and enhanced my findings.

Another method by which I tested my results was triangulation. As my findings formed and developed, I analyzed them in relation to other kinds of data and to scholarship. For example, when a hypothesis evolved from my reading of survey data, I

³⁸ Corbin favors “credibility” over “validity,” explaining that she feels that “validity” carries too many quantitative implications that do not apply neatly to qualitative research.

³⁹ The low rate of response from students may be attributed to several factors: 1) My email address would not be immediately familiar to students, and might therefore have been deleted along with the numerous listserv and spam messages that students receive each day. 2) Some student participants had likely graduated by the time I sent the member-checking and may not have been using their UM email account at that time. 3) Though the excerpts I sent to each participant were brief (2-3 paragraphs each), I was asking participants to commit time to reading and responding to my work, which they may not have wanted to do. 4) Undergraduate students may have felt uncomfortable responding to a graduate student’s/GSI’s writing.

asked whether or not that hypothesis was supported by interview data, or by scholarship/other studies. Triangulation offered confirmation of certain hypotheses, and exposed contradictions that required further reflection.

Occasionally, contradiction came in the form of negative cases, which turned out to be another way of establishing validity in my study. R.B. Johnson explains that when researchers use negative case sampling “they attempt carefully and purposively to search for examples that disconfirm their expectations and explanations about what they are studying” (284). Findings that fit too neatly or appear to be universal are suspect, and the presentation of examples that do *not* support my broader findings make clear that I was not seeking merely to confirm preconceived notions as I worked with data, but that I acknowledged the complexity and richness of the data, as well as the contingent and provisional nature of the claims I made in relation to it.

What Do the Remaining Chapters Address?

The purpose of Chapters 3 through 6 is to present and discuss student and instructor data in relation to two major themes: the perceptions surrounding Christian students and the ways in which students and instructors define the work of composition in response to the issue of religious discourses in academic writing. These two themes emerged during data analysis and are significant because they influence the ways that Christian students and writing instructors think about and approach each other, as well as the choices that students and instructors make about writing and writing instruction.

Chapter 3 addresses instructor perceptions of Christian students, with the purpose of exploring how those perceptions shape instructors’ expectations of Christian students, their responses to the challenges that these students sometimes bring to the classroom, and the dynamics of the student-instructor relationship. In particular, this chapter highlights how instructors’ concerns about Christian students’ power (or lack of it), their belief in universal truth, and their ability or willingness to think critically affect instructors’ responses to students who bring religious discourses into the writing classroom.

Chapter 4 turns to Christian students and the ways that they talk about themselves in relation to the general campus community as well as to writing instructors and classrooms. Students discuss what it means to be a Christian student at UM, and I argue that the uncertainty and anxiety they express about their position in that larger community is brought with them into the composition classroom. Students also discuss how they think that writing instructors perceive Christian students, and their speculations about and examples of instructors' perceptions of Christian students uncover some of the assumptions students make and the fears they carry as they write and as they interact with composition instructors.

The goal of Chapters 5 and 6 is to draw attention to the ways in which composition instructors and Christian students, respectively, are defining the work of composition as they talk about how religious discourses fit (or do not fit) into the writing classroom. These definitions reveal instructors' and students' goals for academic writing, their expectations for the composition classroom, and the ways in which these goals and expectations often don't align. Understanding how students' and instructors' definitions clash contributes to a better sense of why student-instructor conversations about writing can be so difficult and frustrating.

Finally, Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings presented in Chapters 3 through 6, discusses the implications of these findings, and poses questions for continued research on how Christian and other religious discourses affect the composition classroom. Chapter 7 highlights the importance of conversation, both between and about the competing discourses and Christianity and composition.

Chapter Three

“NOT INTOLERANT, JUST UNDEREDUCATED”: INSTRUCTOR PERCEPTIONS OF CHRISTIAN STUDENTS

The quoted phrase in the title of this chapter is drawn from an interview with a writing instructor at the University of the Midwest. The phrase arose when the instructor, Adrienne, tried to describe Christian (and other) students whose writing relied on a system of belief or on a form of evidence that she found problematic in a public university setting. Adrienne was not alone in her struggle to articulate the pedagogical dilemmas that these students brought to the classroom. Throughout my data collection, I read and listened to the ways in which instructors constructed Christian students and the unique challenges they can bring to the writing classroom, and the ways in which they reflected (or did not reflect) on these constructions.

A significant factor in my analysis and discussion of the data from both instructors and students is the notion that the ways in which these groups construct each other—and even the ways in which they discuss their own experiences—do not necessarily reflect conscious choices or essentialized meanings. In fact, the unconscious, sometimes contradictory perceptions of Christian students, writing instructors, and the relationship of religion to higher education are part of what compelled me to do research in this area. Like David Lee, I think that:

the speaker's selection of a particular term, or a particular way of structuring an experience, may be a much less conscious process than the notion of manipulation suggests. It seems much more likely that the construction of meaning operates in terms of a whole range of presuppositions and acquired practices that lie below the level of our conscious awareness (190).

As I draw attention to certain instructors' ways of talking about Christianity or Christian students, I want to emphasize the fact that the ways in which instructors talk about Christian students often reflects both conscious *and* unconscious views of those students.

They do not, in other words, necessarily reflect a stable or fully articulated perception of Christian students.

I've chosen to look at these perceptions as a separate issue from classroom practice or pedagogical strategy. While perceptions of a particular student population *do* affect practice, they carry significance beyond that as well. They can tell us something about the kinds of work valued in composition courses, about the ways in which instructors think about “difficult” students, and about the continuing relationship of religion to American higher education.

Certain perceptions of Christian students emerge from or are discussed in existing scholarship. Chris Anderson, Amy Goodburn, and Juanita Smart, for example, all address the ways in which Christian students tend to be perceived, and share their own perceptions of Christian students that they have encountered. It is important to note, however, that these and other scholars who write about Christian students are often working from anecdotal evidence, and their work comes out of many different institutional sites. Qualitative data about instructor perceptions of Christian students—drawn from a group of instructors at one institution—is helpful in identifying patterns and in making (provisional) claims about how instructors seem to be thinking about this group of students. These patterns and claims are made richer, however, when put in conversation with other scholars' work in this area, because that work serves to affirm and challenge them. For example, when a pattern identified in the data resonates with the perceptions of Christian students discussed by diverse scholars from various institutions, that pattern takes on greater significance, and I can hypothesize that it may not be applicable only to instructors at UM.

Before moving into a discussion of instructor perceptions, I address a couple of the issues surrounding instructors' descriptions of Christian students. First is instructors' guarded stance toward religious discourses as they factor into academic contexts. The complicated relationship of personal beliefs to writing, along with some instructors' discomfort with certain dimensions of religious discourses, influences instructors' perceptions of Christian students. Second, I discuss the difficulty many instructors had in describing Christian students, due to concerns about generalizations and to the challenge of articulating one's perceptions of other people. These two factors—wariness about

religious discourses and difficulty labeling Christian students in particular ways—shape and complicate the three specific perceptions addressed in this chapter.

Instructors' Wariness about Religious Discourses in the Writing Classroom

It is possible, and understandable, that instructors' attitudes toward religious discourses more broadly intersect with and bleed into their perceptions of Christian students. Juanita Smart, for example, discusses her difficulty in approaching a student essay entitled "Frankenstein or Jesus Christ?" The title "sounds an alarm" for Smart, and casts her attention to her own troubled relationship with her religious upbringing. Smart is left to fight "echoes of [her] fundamentalist past" even as she attempts to give the student's ideas a fair hearing (12). In her reflective essay, Smart highlights the struggle some instructors have to negotiate respect for student identity with their negative feelings for certain kinds of religious discourse or expression.

One instructor, Luke, provides a sense of how some instructors at the University of the Midwest deal with such struggles. He says:

And I've heard lecturers say things like, "The minute that somebody starts talking about religion I cut it off right there, because I don't want to get into that kind of discussion, argument, whatever it is. So, it's all off the table. None of it can be brought in in that sense, and if I see them start to say something in the paper, a big red line goes through it and I tell them not to." Right. That kind of thing.

It's unlikely that the instructors referred to here are responding so forcefully because the topic of religion might cause students to write poorly. More likely, the instructors simply want the messiness, the sensitive nature, the potential headache of religion "off the table." Like instructors who ban essays about capital punishment or abortion, these teachers may simply be looking to save themselves—and their students—a great deal of frustration.

Instructors may also be hoping to avoid discourses that are both uncomfortable and unfamiliar to them. Many instructors express frustration with students who invoke the Bible or religious truths in simplistic ways (such situations are cited 22 times in the survey responses), and a few instructors cite their lack of Biblical or theological

knowledge as a source of tension when a Christian student tries to engage them in a debate about their work or about a controversial issue. Paige, for instance, recalls a student who challenged her during class in a way that pitted his knowledge of the Bible against a text she was teaching. She says, “he was able to quote scripture to me, and so there were so many things in that moment. First of all, I’m not savvy enough to be able to work with the scripture that was just given to me.” Paige recounts here a scenario in which her authority in the classroom felt threatened by a student’s use of evidence that she was unable to respond to quickly or confidently, and she amended her teaching in an attempt to sidestep that kind of situation.

Scholarship leads me to believe that other instructors may be looking to avoid discourses that they think are incompatible with the purposes of higher education. While it may be the case that some instructors embrace student faith as a legitimate subject of exploration, that may not be the norm. Composition scholars like Juanita Smart argue that:

typically within the academic community . . . the student’s profession of faith is perceived as a kind of ill-formed, if not illegitimate, monster—a rhetoric that offends and threatens rather than instructs or enlightens other members of the composing community. More often than not, faith talk from students elicits a derisive and pejorative response like the bumper sticker glued to a colleague’s door: ‘Jesus, Save Me from Your Followers’ (14).

Smart’s claim is echoed by Lizabeth Rand, who argues that “religion is seen as worse than other forces that mold people’s minds” (350) and Stephen L. Carter, who decries a cultural trend “toward treating religious beliefs as arbitrary and unimportant, a trend supported by rhetoric that implies that there is something wrong with religious devotion” (6). If there is, in fact, a “cultural trend” toward contempt for religious devotion, it follows that that trend would make its way into the academy. Even without a verifiable trend, there is sufficient evidence from scholarship and from the experiences of instructors and students to suspect that religion is in many ways an unwelcome presence in collegiate courses.

Yvonne, a nonreligious instructor,⁴⁰ seems to feel for her students who arrive at the University of the Midwest strongly devoted to their faith. She says:

I think universities, especially secular universities are not all that – I don't know, I think they portray themselves as not being especially sympathetic to people who are very religious. It's okay to be religious, but you sort of keep it to yourself, that's your personal life, you don't bring it out into the open as much. And if you do then- it's just not given the same respect as other forms of knowledge and other forms of reasoning.

Yvonne notes the emphasis that the humanities puts on “forms” of knowledge and “forms” of reasoning—an emphasis that would seem to welcome religious perspectives as well as nonreligious ones. When it comes down to which forms of reasoning and knowledge are respected, however, religious faith is low on the list, a kind of knowledge that is routinely expected to remain strictly part of “personal life.”

Many composition scholars and instructors are well aware of this expectation, and some have even interrogated their own responses to Christian students' work in order to reflect on how their pedagogy shifts when faith is at issue. For example, in his essay “True Believers, Real Scholars, and True Believing Scholars: Discourses of Inquiry and Affirmation in the Composition Classroom,” Douglas Downs reflects on particularly harsh comments he wrote on a Christian student's paper. The student, in his essay on gay adoption, had failed to draw from sources that did not support his view, and had generally relied on preconceived notions about the topic. These are obvious, and serious, argumentative problems, but Downs notes that his response—which began “Congratulations! You've just written the most indoctrinated, close-minded, uncritical, simplistically reasoned paper I've ever read!”—was motivated by more than just a student's ineffective argument (39).

Responses like Downs' may stem from a desire to push students toward the kinds of critical thinking instructors envision for them, and an academic sense of critical thinking often does not include the ways of reasoning common to mainstream religious faith. Priscilla Perkins and Lizabeth Rand acknowledge “moments when teachers attempt

⁴⁰ In our member-checking exchange, Yvonne wanted to complicate the “nonreligious” label a bit, and decided that a footnote with additional explanation would suffice. She says, “I'm unaffiliated and non-practicing, but think and talk about faith and God on a somewhat regular basis and can be fiercely protective over people's religious views/rights/beliefs in my personal life.”

to save the saved, as it were, to ‘convert’ Christian fundamentalist students from their apparently narrow ways of thinking” (qtd in Fitzgerald 148). Paige reflects on her difficulty with Christian students, and claims that part of that difficulty involves feeling like “it’s a belief I won’t be able to move,” and that Christian students display a “different kind of ignorance” from other students, an ignorance that can’t be addressed or amended easily.

Though it may be easier for instructors to dismiss Christian discourses than to engage with them, the fact that a specific student population enters college strongly committed to those discourses may make avoidance an unviable option. Lest engagement present itself as an entirely unpleasant task, however, instructors can keep in mind that engagement with religious discourses also carries potential for positive influences on teaching, learning, and scholarship. Vander Lei and Fitzgerald remind compositionists of the “rhetorical potential of religious discourse to shape civic life for ill and for good,” drawing from historical examples of “religiously rooted arguments not only wreaking havoc on the environment and people’s lives but also protecting the land and healing many . . . as the religiously motivated resistance to racial segregation in the United States and religiously based reconciliation in South Africa demonstrate” (188). The authors draw attention to the complexity of religious discourses, and to how religious discourses can be used in both constructive and destructive ways.

The Difficulty of Labeling Christian Students

One survey question was intended to elicit a kind of “unfiltered” response to Christian students, in that it asked instructors to name what came to mind when they thought about these students. The question was: *What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Christian student?* Though instructors may still have contemplated their responses, and some hedged their comments, the idea of association (rather than evaluation) at work in the question was intended to allow instructors to name characteristics that they associate with Christian students without having to make claims about the accuracy or correctness of those associations.

The ways in which instructors describe Christian students as a group provide insight into how instructors tend to think about these students. Despite the unavoidable generalizations and oversimplifications inherent in a label such as “Christian students,” instructors’ responses to this term are productive for revealing tendencies—the ways that people “find” themselves thinking, rather than the ways they think when they sort through the complexities, caveats, and contradictions involved in their response to a given question.

Some instructors wrote phrases or sentences describing Christian students, and others listed several single words. While most instructors responded to the question about characteristics that they associate with Christian students with a few words and little commentary, a sizable minority (43%) expressed some hesitation to label these students in a particular way, hedging their responses with disclaimers and caveats, with claims of uncertainty, with words like *perhaps* and *sometimes*, and with declarations of their unwillingness to think about their students in terms of religion.⁴¹ These hedged or hesitant responses are productive moments, as they highlight points of difficulty. Here is one example:

I feel like I should say either “conscientious and kind” or “radical and evangelical” but Christian students, like others, seem to be individuals.⁴²

This instructor has a certain initial impulse—*I feel like I should say...*—and has two different camps of Christian students in mind: “conscientious and kind” and “radical and evangelical.” These characterizations are placed in opposition, creating a gap between evangelical students and those who are kind and conscientious. Also worth noting is that *evangelical*, while not defined by *radical*, is placed in conjunction with it, the two words becoming a single categorical description.

The “kind and conscientious” group is defined not by religious motivation, but by generic character traits. There are a few hypotheses to be drawn from this description. The first is that the students labeled “conscientious and kind” are those who may mark

⁴¹ It is important to acknowledge the instructors for whom offering descriptions of Christian students was uncomfortable and difficult; some resisted description altogether. The discomfort and the resistance are significant in that they highlight the risk involved with revealing one’s gut reactions to any student group. They also demonstrate how careful some of these instructors are to view their students as individuals, and to approach issues like religion cautiously.

⁴² This is the instructor’s entire response to the question.

themselves in some way as Christian, but who do not make an issue of it in the classroom or their writing—in other words, those who create boundaries between their faith and their academic work. The second hypothesis is that the label “conscientious and kind” is applied to students who demonstrate the respect, tolerance and open-mindedness prized by most humanities departments at public universities, and their Christianity does not seem to interfere with that stance. The third is that the “conscientious and kind” students discuss their faith in terms of Jesus’ concern for the weak and poor, who cast their religion as their motivation for loving and helping others, and/or are polite and friendly to their classmates and instructor. Any of these possibilities casts the “conscientious and kind” Christian students as those who know how to present themselves (and their faith) in a way that makes those around them comfortable, in a way that appears to uphold the values of a public academic institution.

Most compelling about this response, however, is that the instructor resists their own impulse. “Conscientious and kind” or “radical and evangelical” is what they *feel* they *should* say, but they undercut their initial statement with “but Christian students, like others, seem to be individuals.” The sentence construction suggests both a subtle resistance to the kinds of answers elicited by the survey question and a wariness of offering too simplistic an answer. That Christian students are individuals is obvious, but well worth stating in response to a question that leans towards generalizations. This instructor, however, writes that they “seem to be” individuals, a move that I interpret as hedging, perhaps unconsciously continued from the initial move of *feeling* like one *should* provide a particular kind of answer.

Other responses to this question are much more direct. In fact, the response below is so direct as to offer commentary on the question itself:

I see this trap and will try to avoid it. I have many Christian students and sometimes I don’t know my students’ religious affiliations, and sometimes they bring it into class and into everything that they do. Of these, characteristics are motivated, sure of themselves, and white.

Despite the vague terms of the response, it is clear that this instructor places Christian students into different camps—those who bring their faith into “everything,” and (by implication) those who don’t. It is fair, and telling, that this instructor saw the question

as a snare. After all, those trained in the humanities tend to be sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping any group of people, and suspicious of simplicity in the face of complex issues. The instructor used the word *sometimes*, twice. They “sometimes” know their students’ religious affiliations, and those students “sometimes” bring their religion into their academic work. The instructor makes it clear that no single, wholly accurate statement can be made about Christian students, and other instructors elaborate on the notion that there are different kinds of Christian students. One survey respondent writes:

There are radical Christian students and normative Christian students. The radical Christians have a difficult time understanding why the Bible cannot be used as a primary logical support for a research paper, whereas the normative Christian students fit their Christian ethos within an identity that allows for academic research as well. In other words, sometimes Christianity is part of a healthy hybrid identity and it informs students’ moral behavior, but sometimes it is part of a radical stance and it interferes with academic growth.

This instructor moves right into a discussion of Christian students with no hedging, and offers a tightly organized analysis of the Christian student body (at least at the University of the Midwest). The instructor does, however, separate Christian students into different camps. According to this instructor, Christian students come in two varieties: “radical” and “normative.”

The instructor is upfront with their judgment of what makes a good or academically sound Christian student, highlighted first by the word *normative* (especially as opposed to *radical*) and further established by the definition of a *healthy* identity. Held in contrast to each other are Christian students whose “radical” views inhibit their academic performance—they do not adopt the proper academic stance towards religious texts, and they cling to their beliefs in such a way that they cannot grow academically. Though the instructor does not elaborate on how religious identity interferes with academic growth, the instructor has provided at least one example (use of Biblical texts as logical support in research papers) of how the “radical” Christian student stands out and is potentially problematic in an academic setting.

More complicated is the description of the “normative” Christian student, the one who maintains a “healthy hybrid identity.” These students seem to play the academic game more successfully than their radical counterparts. They (it is implied) understand when and when not to draw from the Bible, for example, and they “fit their Christian

ethos within an identity that allows for academic research as well.” Their Christian identity may “inform” their *moral* behavior—an appropriate, or “healthy,” place for it, according to this writer—but it stays out of the way in the classroom.

While intriguing, this response does raise questions about the ways in which instructors describe and define their students. Here is an instructor who takes it upon themselves to determine what constitutes a “healthy” Christian identity, a problematic move even if the instructor is Christian as well. In this case, the label of “healthy” goes to students who allow their Christianity to inform moral behavior, but who do not allow it to “interfere” with their academic growth. Important to note here is that the instructor does not offer something in between these two positions—there is not, for example, a representation of a Christian student whose religious beliefs inform their academic work in productive ways, in addition to informing their moral behavior.

The word *radical* is worth close examination here as well. It is a term commonly used to separate the “normal” adherents to a belief system from those who are a little more aggressive, unstable, strange, or dangerous. The most current cultural example is “radical Islam,” a phrase invoked frequently in the aftermath of September 11th.⁴³ One might also hear references to “radical feminists” or “radical anti-abortion groups.” The implication of statements like these is that the people falling under such a label are unable to think about their ideology in a rational way—they are intolerant, hateful, fanatical. While some embrace the term “radical” for its connotations of emphatic belief, perseverance in the face of opposition, and dedication to a cause, the word carries decidedly negative connotations when applied to a group from the outside.

As is clear in the examples discussed above, instructors’ survey responses reveal delineations between *types* of Christian students. Instructors make distinctions between Christian students whom they see as radical, evangelical, conservative, and judgmental and those who appear to blend more seamlessly into the academic environment. In her interview, Gina names the former group “the Praise Jesus types,” a label she admits is slightly derogatory and possibly one she shouldn’t use.

⁴³ This is not to say that phrases like this one do not have their important functions. “Radical Islam” and “Muslim extremist” were significant ways of creating rhetorical and moral space between the few people responsible for terrorist attacks and the millions of people who practice Islam.

Interestingly, Gina notes some tension around the ways that students might label her as well. She says:

I also think of faith as- and religious identity as something that's really intensely personal and I think I would consider myself a Christian, but pretty liberal and I would imagine that a lot of my students, if they sat down and asked me what I really believed, wouldn't consider me a Christian. And so I think it's partly that it's not an adequate descriptor that they would make assumptions about what I think and I believe that wouldn't be true.

Gina's reflection pinpoints the difficulty with the "Christian student" label—after all, she herself has been a Christian student, and yet her views, academic perspective, and experiences do not align with those held by the Christian students whom instructors seem to find most problematic.

The hesitation that many of these instructors display as they describe Christian students highlights the delicate nature of discussing a specific group of people, as well as the difficulty inherent in conversations about religion. Instructors here are striving to make clear their recognition of diversity within this student population, even as they make moves to characterize Christian students as a group. What is also made clear is that a certain segment of Christian students—the "radical" ones—causes consternation for instructors. These students exist enough outside the norm to attract attention, and they appear to cause unique pedagogical problems.

Three Prominent Instructor Perceptions of Christian Students

Although there is no single, unified image of a Christian student to be drawn from these responses, there are several prominent depictions that present themselves when all of the responses to the question are gathered and analyzed. Three prominent "instructor perceptions" emerge revolving around the issues of power, universal truth, and critical thinking: Christian students as culturally dominant in and outside of the university or, conversely, as vulnerable in public university contexts; Christian students as those who cling to the idea of universal truth; and Christian students as unable or unwilling to think critically. All three perceptions, though neither universal nor uncontested, raise

important questions about the challenges that some Christian students present to instructors and about pedagogical responses to these challenges.

Perception 1 (in two parts): *Christian Students Carry Cultural Power and Dominance*
or
Christian Students are Vulnerable

It is difficult to address the issue of religion—and particularly the connection of religion to institutions of higher learning—without also addressing the issue of power. The long-held Protestant dominion over most American higher education necessarily raises questions about how to think about Christian discourses and Christian students in a time when Protestantism no longer wields official authority over public institutions (Hollinger 47-8; Nord 97). Are these students still heirs of cultural privilege, such that they are always already a dominant group? Or do they become part of a maligned and vulnerable population once they enter a secular university?

Though some significant patterns of description emerged as instructors wrote about and discussed Christian students on their surveys and in their interviews, there was a great deal of discrepancy regarding the dominance of Christian discourses in the context of a public university. Instructor responses ranged from arguing that Christian students were silenced and vulnerable to claiming that Christian students wielded the same kind of authority and power in an academic setting as in any other context.

This range is also reflected in recent scholarship regarding Christianity and higher education. Though it draws in those with moderate views as well, the ongoing conversation about Christianity and its place in public universities is shaped significantly by those who view Christian students as vulnerable young people at risk of being silenced and swayed by academic forces, and by those who see them as inheritors of vast cultural power and privilege.

The most obvious proponents of the perception of Christian students as vulnerable are those who write and distribute the previously discussed guidebooks for Christian students attending public universities, as well as those who run “faith camps”—retreats intended to equip Christian high school students for the challenges they will face in the secular academic world. J Budziszewski, a professor of government and philosophy at

the University of Texas, wrote *How to Stay Christian in College* because “from the moment [Christian] students set foot on the contemporary campus, their Christian conviction and discipline are assaulted” (15).

Though she does not talk in terms of “assault,” Gina reflects on a kind of indirect aggression toward Christian students in discussing what she sees as the social/casual acceptability of joking about Christian students in academia. She recalls a particular conversation with her colleagues about the Christian student in one of their courses. This very bright, talented student had decided to go into Christian ministry after college. When the student’s decision was mentioned, Gina remembers that it was met with “language, like, ‘What a waste’.” Gina also relates the story of overhearing a colleague complain to a friend that she had “another Christ-er” in her course. These are two isolated incidents, but they are reflective of a willingness to talk about a specific kind of student in a derogatory manner without fear of judgment by one’s intellectual peers. The joking/derogatory language supports Elizabeth Rand’s claim about the perception of religion as “worse” than other kinds of belief.

Others interpret the challenges that Christian students face less in terms of attack or ridicule and more from a standpoint of underlying assumptions held by many in the academic world. For example, Bonnie Lenore Kyburz points out the “academic assumption that students of faith must subordinate their discourse to the ostensibly superior ‘official language’ of an academic rationality” (138). Scholars like Mark Edwards concur, arguing that the academy has moved too far in the direction of exclusion in its attempts to quell discrimination and a dominant Protestant history (2).

This line of thinking was upheld by three of the instructors interviewed for this study, although they were not always speaking in terms of official discourses or historical dominance. Yvonne, for example, had this to say about Christian discourse in composition courses:

I think, to the question about whether or not a Christian discourse is privileged in academia, I don’t think so. At least in my writing classrooms, I think that sort of outing yourself as a Christian is a risky thing to do from the perspective of a young student where- it’s almost like religion – again, religion can be a part of your life but if you start bringing it into your classroom it must be a huge part of

your life or enough of a part of your life that it's relevant to bring it in and then that starts to be less acceptable to this age of students who want to be doing things that are very un-Christian.

According to Yvonne, the dominance of Christian discourse depends on context, and the context of a writing course at a public university is one in which relying on Christian discourse becomes “risky.” Yvonne’s use of the phrase “outing yourself” calls to mind the risks associated with disclosing one’s sexuality—a significant, and potentially dangerous, choice for members of marginalized groups. The association of coming out as Christian with coming out as, say, homosexual asks us to think of Christian students as vulnerable to the same kinds of fears and constraints facing the latter group.

For others, such a parallel is a strained one at best. For example, when asked to articulate how she thought about Christian students in her classroom and how she dealt with their resistance to some of her chosen texts, Paige responds:

I want to be able to explore topics that are provocative and that affect their [students'] lives and our lives, but I also don't want to – I also want to protect the people I've identified as being vulnerable. The Christian students, in my mind, are not vulnerable, and so – that they have this authority and power.

Paige goes on to make an explicit distinction between Christian students and gay students, making clear that the former have a kind of power that the latter often do not. Despite context, it seems, Christian students carry power with them, and are therefore not “at risk” in the ways that Yvonne and Budziszewski claim. Paige makes decisions about protection in her classroom based, in part, on historical and cultural privilege and disenfranchisement.

For Paige, such decisions can be problematic, as she makes clear when she discusses her fears about leaning too far towards treating Christian students as a privileged group (a point of focus addressed more closely in Chapter 5). Others, like David Hollinger, have little sympathy for those who worry about the silencing of Christian students. Hollinger argues forcefully against allowing the consideration of religious argument/evidence—particularly from a Protestant Christian perspective—into the “rare space in which ideas identified as Christian are not implicitly privileged” (40).

Others may find themselves in the murkier waters between the “Christian students as vulnerable” and “Christian students as dominant” oppositions. Colin, for example,

offers a perspective on dominance that leaves no group off the hook. Colin claims that dominance itself is a matter of perspective. He uses as an example a white, Protestant Christian farmer in Kansas, a person who may statistically belong to a dominant, powerful group, but who may nonetheless feel cast outside of most structures of power. Colin then refers to a hypothetical academic, who statistically is in the minority, both as an intellectual and as a secular humanist, but who also holds a position of great authority in certain contexts (and yet feels threatened in others). As Colin puts it, “the statistics are telling you one thing, but your own personal experience is telling you something very different.” Rather than sympathizing strictly with academics or with Christian students, Colin takes both to task:

And so there’s this interesting thing that happens in the classroom where both groups have claim to one kind of power, and—but both groups also feel as though they’re coming from a place of weakness. And I think the problem that happens, you know, in the classroom, is that both sides are consciously or unconsciously being disingenuous about the complexity of the situation . . . they choose to assert their power when it’s convenient and then assert their victimhood when it’s convenient.

By highlighting the frequent simplification of dominance and vulnerability, Colin’s statement challenges both Christian students and academics to think more critically about the ways that they draw upon dominance and vulnerability. It also ascribes agency to both groups, as they make choices about how their dominant and vulnerable subjectivities will play out inside and outside of the classroom.

Whether or not Christian students are aware of their dual dominant/vulnerable nature is another story. Some students entering college—especially those who have participated in majority, mainstream culture—may not have given much thought to their own forms of cultural power and/or vulnerability, or how those forms of power will play out in a public university classroom. Adrienne speculates that:

most of them, especially the ones from rural communities, do come from- most of them come from a Christian background, and I think- I mean I definitely think Christian discourse is the dominant discourse in America and I think it very much is for them in their smaller town, and then they come here and it’s not allowed in the classroom. So I think that they- that must be a really weird switch for them...

Adrienne appears to sympathize with Christian students insofar as their move from inhabiting a dominant discourse to entering a context in which that discourse is “not allowed” must be “really weird.” She does not say that they shouldn’t have to make this switch, but she feels for the students who are unprepared for such a change.

There is a notable lack of consensus among instructors and scholars regarding Christian students’ power in a secular academic context. It is part of what makes the issue so compelling, and so appropriate to scholarly debate. What *can* be established is the very real presence of power as an issue surrounding Christian students and Christian discourses. Their perceived dominance, vulnerability, or combination of the two shapes the ways in which instructors react to, interact with, and think about these students.

Perception 2: Christian Students Cling to Universal Truth, which Hinders their Academic Work

To overlook the role played by the notion of universal Truth in the interactions between Christian students and their instructors would be to miss a large and significant piece of the puzzle. Truth with a capital “T” (often called just that for the sake of clarity) is a much-maligned concept in contemporary intellectual thought, and yet Christian students sometimes appear quite content to share and defend what they hold to be universally true.

Universal truth is problematic in an academic world that prizes “a postmodern belief in the social construction of ‘truth’ . . . and a Western, positivist conviction that knowledge is progressive, rational, and evolutionary” (B. Williams, “The Book” 107). In some ways, students who profess universal truths are, perhaps unconsciously, calling into question the philosophical grounds on which much of their college education is based. They are also, perhaps more consciously, questioning the belief systems of their peers and instructors. Universal truth, by nature, applies to all, and many instructors are uncomfortable with the aura of judgment surrounding its proclamation.

Paige, for example, describes her own instinctive “imagining” of Christian students this way:

you end up imagining this mass, this throbbing mass of intolerance that gets together every Friday night and so I think that – and I mean, that’s – I don’t think

that's uncommon about churches, right? Is that for people who don't go to church, who imagine this congregation who come together and sort-of get all riled up...

Paige draws on the notion of imagination twice in this short statement, making it very clear that this is not a claim about the reality of the Christian student population, but about a perception of that population. She is drawing both from common cultural references, such as a “riled up” congregation⁴⁴ and from her own sense of how “outsiders” to religious communities tend to feel about them (though the pauses, false starts, and tag question suggest uncertainty about the connection between her perception and that of this larger group of outsiders).

Where Paige most clearly conveys her sense of Christian students *as a group*, however, is in her first “imagining”: she envisions a “mass, this throbbing mass of intolerance.” In this image, Christian students are not students at all, nor are they—at this point—represented as congregants. They are a “mass,” and they therefore lack any specific, individual features. This mass is composed of “intolerance,” and the mass is “throbbing.” It is a rather violent image, inviting connotations of pain, unstoppable force, and the growing strength of something destructive. It is an image that casts Christians as undeniably powerful, and it resonates with the fear and anxiety that Paige cites during other parts of her interview. It also implies a group that shuts out people with ideas that do not fit within its borders—a group that is a “mass of intolerance” would seem to be one whose primary identification is derived from universal truths that cast “outsiders” or outside beliefs as wrong.

Paige later admits to a fear of personal judgment from religious students who lay claim to the “right” way to live. She says:

I think with what I would identify as religious people, I'm sure there's a fear that there's judgment of me, too. I think that's why a lot of us tend to fear people who identify themselves as religious is that somehow we are being judged for not going to church, or for believing certain things or not believing certain things.

⁴⁴ I call this a common cultural reference because the “riled up” church is one of the ways that Christian communities are represented in films (*The Apostle*; *Fletch Lives*; *Jesus Camp*; *Religulous*), TV shows (*Scrubs*; *South Park*; *Friday Night Lights*), and other pop cultural arenas. This representation is often used for comic effect, and frequently involves African-American and/or Southern characters. The reflection is not without its real-life counterpart, of course; there are Christian denominations—Southern Baptist and Pentecostal, most notably—known for conducting more lively services than others.

This fear of judgment wouldn't make sense without the notion of universal truth, though Paige does not mention truth at all in her statement. Unless she is confronting people who believe universal truths govern (or should govern) all of humanity, Paige has no reason to fear judgment for "believing certain things or not believing certain things."

Another instructor, responding to a survey question, writes, "when we reached the point in the semester when I asked them to begin seriously considering arguments that challenged their faith, they began to treat me differently, as if I was trying to trick them." In this case, students' apparent judgment is in reaction to a pedagogical strategy, rather than to the instructor's personal beliefs. It seems that the instructor initially had a positive relationship with their students, but the relationship shifted dramatically when the students were asked to consider arguments that questioned the truth claims inherent to their belief system. The students were not merely unhappy about the intellectual exercise; they treated the instructor differently for asking them to do it.

The judgment instructors perceived from Christian students was not always personal; sometimes it was judgment of another group, or of ideas that clashed with the students' notion of truth and morality. For example, one surveyed instructor recalls a student who "wrote journals that expressed intolerance towards homosexuals" and says that they "felt uncomfortable responding to it." Another surveyed instructor describes students who would not even engage in discussion about issues on which their minds were made up. The instructor writes, "Some of my students refused to discuss the issue of gay marriage in a debate in class on the basis that it was morally wrong and did not need to be discussed."

Another surveyed instructor remembers a student who "took an aggressive, unapologetic anti-gay clergy stance [in an essay]. . . she didn't consider any realistic views of the issue from any perspective but her own." In these cases, a student imported their sense of truth and goodness into their academic work in a way that left their instructor uneasy. The problem was not, apparently, the students' chosen topic, but the "intolerance" communicated in the writing, and the unwillingness to engage with opposing worldviews in respectful ways.

One surveyed instructor writes of a student with whom they appear to have had a strained relationship:

I had one student who was smug and self-important, thinking she was better than the books we were reading. She described this to me as coming from her firm faith. But actually she was just shallow and God had nothing to do with it.

This student did not merely convey a reluctance to consider alternative perspectives; she communicated to her instructor that she thought herself above the assigned reading. Her manner affected the way in which she approached coursework, but it also influenced her instructor's opinion of her; she was deemed "shallow," and the instructor apparently had a hard time even taking the student's claims of faith-based resistance seriously.

There are nine instances of student resistance reported by instructors that involve a student's unwillingness to revise and rethink arguments that are rooted in some of kind of "core belief" or universal truth. Some students simply ignored their instructor's recommendations to reconsider arguments grounded in theology; others called into question the instructor's ability to understand the argument itself. Adrienne recounts a particularly frustrating interaction with a student who, as they engaged in a lengthy conversation about one of his essays, cast himself as the rational, calm conversational participant and her as the emotional, confused one. She recalls:

[T]hen in the second meeting, he just kind of came to it, being ready—clearly I didn't know the position that I was supporting and he needed to educate me about why his beliefs were so much more correct than mine, and that meeting was really difficult because he was extremely calm through the entire thing and just kept kind of repeating himself over and over again. Whereas, because he wasn't hearing what I had to say at all, I kept becoming more and more sort of agitated and more and more like, "No, really! I really do know how to grade your paper, and I really do—I really have thought about the implications of your argument... [H]e wasn't trying to be a jerk about it in the meeting; he was just absolutely positive that I was wrong.

Issues of gender may have played into this interaction as well, but the first point of tension that Adrienne points to is the student seeming to think that his beliefs were better than hers. Adrienne felt as if she needed to defend her ability to comprehend and evaluate his paper fairly and professionally, and the student remained "absolutely positive" that she was "wrong." The student apparently "wasn't trying to be a jerk"; he was simply inflexible on beliefs that he could not allow himself to question. Universal truth might allow for polite conversation—even debate—but it does not allow for much movement.

The rigidity of universal truth may be why some Christian students “have a hard time understanding why the Bible can’t be used as a primary logical support for a research paper,” in the words of one surveyed instructor, or why it can be “hard to get the student to move beyond making arguments with God and morality as the only evidence,” in the words of another. After all, how much better evidence could one find than something universally, unquestionably true?

Raising questions about a student’s reliance on Biblical or theological evidence can be tricky, however. One instructor describes trying to explain to a student why her paper received a poor grade. They write, “by giving the Bible the last word they eschewed academic debate . . . it is difficult to explain to the student that the grade reflects a lack of warrants for her claim itself, which is based in the dogma of the religion.” What the instructor interprets as “dogma,” the student likely interpreted as logical, truthful argument. Their fundamentally opposing views of truth and how truth can be presented in an academic context leave instructor and student at something of an impasse. Universal truth effectively ends productive conversation about the student’s work.

Some assert, however, that Christian students are not the only ones clinging to universal truths, and that instructors would benefit from reflecting on their own non-negotiable “truths.” Juanita Smart, for instance, argues that instructors must examine their own “sacred ‘faiths’ that [they] insist on in [their] classrooms” if they are to respond effectively and honestly to students’ religious beliefs (14). Numerous writers have pointed to what they interpret as unquestioned truths held by secular universities, and to the “fundamentalist” zeal with which they are held: that diversity is an absolute good, that a relativistic worldview is the best kind to have, that tolerance is to be valued above all else (Bernstein 151; Edwards 25; Marsden 38; Nye 9). Others note the inevitability of universal truths and nonnegotiable values in any worldview (with the exception of total anarchism); religions are merely more vocal about them, and more willing to use the vocabulary of “truth” and “goodness.”

Universal truth certainly poses a problem for many instructors, but the real issue may be the framework within which Christian students express them, or the ways in which they connect them to their more traditional intellectual work. In *The Soul of the*

University, George M. Marsden critiques the modern secular university for what he sees as the biased, and therefore hypocritical, implementation of its most esteemed values. He writes:

there is a definite bias against any perceptible religiously informed perspectives getting a hearing in the university classroom. Despite the claims of the contemporary universities to stand above all for openness, tolerance, academic freedom, and equal rights, viewpoints that are based on discernibly religious concepts (for instance, that there is a created moral order or that divine truths might be revealed in a sacred Scripture) are often informally or explicitly excluded from classrooms. Especially offensive, it seems, would be any traditional Christian versions of such teachings (33-34).

Marsden implies that it is not the mere mention of universal truths that is excluded from the classroom; it is the mention of “divine truths”—universal truths specifically grounded in religious belief. Marsden’s comments appear to be supported by instructors like those discussed earlier who take religion “off the table,” and by those who have stated that religious perspectives are appropriate only in specific, limited contexts, such as personal essays.

It seems that Christian students take it upon themselves to exclude their own religious beliefs, appearing to pick up on the cultural cues they’ve gotten from their academic environment, or from what they’ve been told to expect from their academic environment. Nadia recounts a conversation that she had with a religious student who went out of his way to separate his religious beliefs from his academic work. In her interview, Nadia remembers how she became aware of his faith:

And this one student had written something really vague, that was to the extent of, I know I have views that are different from a lot of other people’s in the classes, and that’s okay . . . Before he even knew anyone . . . So, when he came to my office, I was like, “What do you mean by this? This is totally vague.” And he said, “Well, I’m Catholic, and conservative.” And I said, “Well, write about that.” He’s like, “Oh, but, I don’t want to upset people, or, disrupt the waters.” Yeah. And I think that’s how most people – most of the Christian students feel. That this just isn’t really the forum

Nadia’s student had entered the course prepared to censor himself in certain ways based not on actual encounters with the instructor or other students (at least not in this course), but on perceived expectations of religious (and conservative, in this case) students. Nadia has actually developed the opinion that “to really be Christian here, you

have to examine your views” because she feels that Christian students are inviting some real challenges if they choose to make their faith known to others. Nadia’s view of these students stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of them as unwilling to think critically about their beliefs.

Unlike the students discussed earlier in this section, Nadia’s student seems to have been very aware of how his beliefs might affect or offend his peers and/or instructor. Far from declaring a universal truth, this student seems hesitant to make claims of any kind that might “disrupt the waters.” The data presents us with extremes: Christian students who bring universal truths and the judgments that those truths imply into the classroom in ways that frustrate their instructors,⁴⁵ and Christian students who feel that their beliefs do not belong in the classroom at all.

Perception 3: *Christian Students are Unable or Unwilling to Think Critically*

Instructors in this study seem to perceive Christian students as having particular difficulty engaging with texts that challenge their beliefs, and with questioning their own beliefs. Twelve of the forty surveyed instructors (30%) describe difficulties with Christian students that relate to these issues. Also, seven instructors responded to the question *What characteristics come to mind when you think of Christian students?* with words and phrases that convey a perceived lack of critical thinking skills, though the term *critical thinking* was not used. These responses included: “sometimes close-minded,” “sometimes judgmental” (written by two instructors), “not very open-minded” (written

⁴⁵ Colin is critical of instructors whose frustration leads them to dismiss religious conviction, claiming that it cuts off potentially informative and intellectually engaging conversations. He says:

And this is also part of this whole thing of professors just saying no, and not being willing to sort of go back and in and say well, where is this coming from, what’s the frame for this, and say well, wait a minute, let’s go back to the gospel. Let’s not talk on my turf, right, where you feel disempowered, but let’s talk on your turf and have like an honest discussion here, and you know, not say that we’re—you know, that I’m the authority, you’re the authority, but let’s just talk about it.

Colin’s approach asks instructors to move purposefully into a conversation that may not be entirely comfortable for them, in order to engage with Christian student discourses. Left unspoken here are the difficulties of such an approach, particularly for instructors who are less comfortable taking on such an “honest discussion” than Colin may be.

by two instructors), “suspicious of ideas that challenge their faith,” and “sometimes inflexible thinking.”

Some instructors reflected on examples of frustrating experiences with specific Christian students. For example, an instructor recalls one student’s resistance to an assignment that required them to explore “both sides of the question” they had selected:

The student was an Episcopalian and she felt strongly about writing an essay on the situation with the gay Episcopalian bishop. Her essay was not academically strong—it read like more of a letter to the editor, complete with name-calling. The student took an aggressive, unapologetic anti-gay clergy stance and she didn’t really complete the assignment, which asked students to consider both sides of the question. Her attempts to consider the opposing view were lame—she only considered the most extreme pro-gay clergy views (that I doubt anyone would really hold) to knock them down—she didn’t consider any realistic views of the issue from any perspective but her own.

Although the student appears to have made some attempt at engaging with perspectives outside of her own, her attempts were “lame”—they struck the reader/instructor as a thinly veiled effort to lend credence to her own views without seriously engaging others. Any “realistic” views were ignored.

Other instructors write about a lack of critical thinking skills as a trend they’ve noticed with Christian students. For example, one instructor writes:

They are often really eager to explore religious issues in their writing—abortion, gay marriage, pre-marital sex. I am frequently surprised by their party-line thinking on these topics, though I guess I shouldn’t be, as most 1st and 2nd year students think as they’ve been taught to think or are only beginning to question their assumptions.

The problem here does not appear to be the “religious” topics themselves; rather, it is the Christian students’ “party-line thinking” that causes the instructor trouble. The instructor does, of course, qualify this statement to include “most 1st and 2nd year students,” and claims that the Christian students’ writing shouldn’t surprise them. It stands to reason that the topics chosen by Christian students—abortion and gay marriage being two particularly controversial social and political topics—lead the instructor to take notice of the academic shortcomings of those students.

Another instructor writes, “They [Christian students] tended to write about religious/faith things in at least one assignment. The beliefs were fairly typical for young

adults at that age who I judged to be fairly conservative/sheltered.”⁴⁶ The conscious use of the word *judged* here is compelling, because this instructor has evaluated the students themselves based on an interpretation of the beliefs expressed in the students’ writing. In this case, the beliefs are cast as “typical” of “young adults at that age” who are “sheltered.” In context, it is clear that being sheltered has a negative affect on academic work—the writing of these students, it seems, is symptomatic of being sheltered and of being in a certain stage of development, as opposed to reflecting careful, critical thought. It is worth noting that over 25% of instructor respondents described Christian students as either “sheltered” or “naïve”; though most did not make explicit connections between those descriptors and students’ academic work, it is possible that some of these instructors would evaluate students’ work much as this instructor did.

Students’ uncritical use of religious evidence/interpretation was also cited as a source of consternation. One instructor recalls that with Christian students “there was a tendency toward religious interpretations of texts, even when there wasn’t sufficient supporting evidence to base the assignment/paper on.” Students exhibiting this tendency are only able to view texts through a single lens—that of their religious beliefs. Such a tendency leaves instructors in an uncomfortable position in terms of drawing students out of such a narrow view. Another instructor comments on how hard it is to get students “to

⁴⁶ The linking of *sheltered* and *conservative* in this quote is an interesting rhetorical move, one that connects conservatism to the state of being young and sheltered. Christian students are frequently described as conservative—that specific term was used by eight instructors (20%) in survey responses and by two of seven instructors during interviews—or at least ideologically committed to issues associated with conservatives. Eleven instructors (28%), for example, described contexts in which Christian students chose to write about abortion, gay marriage, or gay clergy, and most of those contexts are marked by the instructor’s inclusion of words like “homophobic,” “anti-gay marriage,” “intolerance towards homosexuals,” and so forth. The association of Christian students with specific political movements or preferences may heighten the degree to which they stand out as a problematic student population, particularly because those political preferences appear to be unpopular ones among university faculty, and perhaps humanities faculty in particular.

Though studies of faculty political commitments are frequently contested in terms of their generalizability and accuracy, such studies point to a largely Democrat and/or liberal faculty population. Statistics vary: The Center for the Study of Popular Culture reported, in 2003, that faculty who were registered as Democrats outnumbered registered Republicans 10-1; in 2005, a study entitled “Politics and Professional Advancement Among College Faculty” reported that, as of 1999, 72% of college faculty self-identified as liberal; a study conducted by Klein and Stern reported Democrats outnumbering Republicans 30-1 in anthropology, and 7-1 across the humanities and social sciences (Gravois). A study by Solon J. Simmons, professor of conflict analysis and sociology at George Mason University, found that 90% of professors call themselves liberal or moderate (Wilson). The trend has been so well documented and so thoroughly discussed that some scholars feel that apparent bias against Christians in academe actually has more to do with the association of Christianity with conservatism than with religion itself (Balmer and Marsden, qtd in Bartlett).

move beyond making arguments with God and morality as the only evidence.” They add, “I also don’t know how to challenge some Christian students to be more critical thinkers without entering into religious dialogue.” The instructor is caught in quite a predicament—how to encourage a student to enter a dialogue that they don’t want to have, while avoiding a dialogue that the *instructor* doesn’t want to have?

It appears to be a matter of some debate whether or not it is even possible for Christian students to enter productive dialogues that would encourage critical thinking. While some instructors write of Christian students’ unwillingness to think critically, others write of Christian students as incapable of thinking critically. For instance, one instructor describes his Christian students’ essays as “often well written” but also as essays that “failed in their philosophical goals.” The failure occurred because “there were certain premises that the students wouldn’t allow themselves to consider . . . I was frustrated that students were unwilling to consider these possibilities.” Another instructor writes, “many of my Christian students seem programmed to tune-out or ignore certain kinds of challenges to their faith.” According to these two instructors, many Christian students shut down or turn away from certain conversations or arguments before they can even begin. But the first instructor calls them “unwilling” to consider challenging premises—indicative of a conscious choice on the students’ part. The other says that the students seem “programmed” to ignore challenging premises—a rhetorical move that shifts agency away from the students and onto some other, more powerful person/structure.

Three additional instructors fall on the side of “willingness,” and two additional instructors support “ability” as the force behind some Christian students’ poor critical thinking skills. Here is what the “willingness” advocates have to say about their students:

The student was unwilling to explore the other side of the issue in order to address counter arguments effectively and provided evidence/support that would only be convincing to someone with similar religious beliefs.

Sometimes the writing represented honest engagement and defense of their ideas, other times it was just regurgitation of ideas they’d been taught since they were young.

Student #1 was not willing at all to participate in the ‘questioning assumptions’

exercise I did with my class. Often voiced open resistance to ideas before even considering them.

These three descriptions construct Christian students as people who are able to look at multiple sides of issues and to participate in academic discussions that rely upon and develop critical thinking. Even the students whose writing was sometimes “just regurgitation” of what they’d been taught demonstrated that they were also capable of “honest engagement and defense of their ideas.” The issue is not ability, then; it is the willingness to *choose* critical thinking.

The “ability” instructors seem not to view critical thinking as even a viable option for some Christian students. These instructors write:

I always tell students that part of the assignment is to question their own assumptions & I don’t know if this is fair/possible for fundamentalist students.⁴⁷

Other students have written about faith less successfully [than a previously mentioned student]. (Because they’re less able to treat their views as flexible or as a viewpoint among others.)

In these contexts, willingness is not much of a factor. The first instructor goes so far as to wonder whether it is even “possible” for fundamentalist students to question their assumptions, and therefore whether it is “fair” to ask it of them. The second instructor quoted offers a similar view: the less successful students did not succeed because they were less *able* to do the kinds of work required of them, not because they were unwilling to do it.

Both of these perspectives on students who do not appear to engage in critical thinking have important pedagogical implications. Students who are *unwilling* to think critically leave instructors with a few different options: the instructor can try directly to persuade the student that thinking critically is an important part of their development as a student; the instructor can try to find new ways to incorporate critical thinking into the classroom, with the hope that alternative strategies will “reach” the student more successfully; or the instructor can place full responsibility on the student to engage in critical thinking or not, based on the resources available to them (comments on papers,

⁴⁷ Here the instructor draws on terminology (“fundamentalist”) that was not present anywhere on the survey. It is unclear if they are conflating “fundamentalist” with “Christian” or if they are using the narrower term to qualify their response.

etc). A student's *inability* to think critically is somewhat less complicated, though perhaps more daunting: the instructor can either find a way to teach the student *how* to think critically—just as any student who is not yet able to do something must be taught—or the instructor can decide that the student lacks some fundamental intellectual resource, making the effort to teach them a waste.

This is not to say that there is a neat, uncomplicated binary created by instructor response. Three instructors offer entirely different depictions of Christian students as critical thinkers. One instructor writes, “all of my students have been very open and willing to consider many viewpoints.” The instructor does not mention Christian students specifically, but they are clearly indicating that Christian students did not appear vastly different from others. Another instructor recalls a student who wrote a paper on Psalm 23. They write, “it resulted in a wonderful final paper in which she took a critical look at what happened and re-evaluated it through that frame and once again through the frame of her faith.” This instructor was pleased not just with the quality of the writing in this case; they were pleased with the sophistication of the thinking that went into it.

In a similar vein, another instructor recalls, “One Christian student wrote about the definitional question of whether a fetus = life and I think he really learned a lot. I was impressed by his work because he was really writing to clarify his own thinking.” In this case, as in the one above, the willingness and ability to think critically are not at issue. These students, like any others, were both willing and able to use writing as a means of exploration, and were open to the possibility of their own perspectives being reshaped by the undertaking.

These last cases are significant, but they are also in the minority. Descriptions of Christian students' unwillingness or inability to think critically are far more common, both in the data collected for this study and in much of the scholarship about Christian students (C. Anderson; Bleich, qtd in Hairston, “Diversity”; Downs; Smart). Despite discrepant cases, the predominant image of Christian students seems to be one of a population unwilling or unable to examine its beliefs.

Implications

As is evident from the many different stories about and descriptions of Christian students in this chapter, there is no consensus among the instructors in this study about who, exactly, these students are, and how they should be dealt with. Even individual instructors are, at times, conflicted about these students and their relationship to them. The perceptions discussed here do, however, demonstrate some of the real struggles that instructors have as they communicate with and teach Christian students. Instructors appear to be encountering fundamental problems involving critical thinking and the incorporation of universal truth into academic writing, as well as issues of student power and vulnerability, and these problems shape their perceptions of Christian students.

The conscious and unconscious ways that instructors tend to think and talk about Christian students carry significant implications for composition courses. First, their perceptions reveal elements of how instructors define the work of composition (an issue to be addressed more fully in Chapter 5). Second, these perceptions may influence instructors' ideas about what Christian students are capable of (Can they think critically? Can they consider the notion of limited and contingent truth?) and how they should be engaged (Are they powerful students whose voices tend to dominate others? Are they a vulnerable group in need of protection?). Finally, as instructor perceptions are communicated directly and indirectly to Christian students, they have the power to affect student-instructor communication and the effectiveness of their interactions around students' work.

The pedagogical issues raised by Christian students, and by instructor perceptions of Christian students, are complicated and not easily defined. By articulating their perceptions of Christian students, however, instructors may be taking a step toward more productive engagement with religious discourses in the writing classroom.

Chapter Four

“THERE IS A FEAR OF NOT BEING ACCEPTED FOR WHO YOU ARE”: CHRISTIAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PLACE ON CAMPUS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO WRITING INSTRUCTORS

Chapter 3 addressed instructor perceptions of Christian students; this chapter shifts attention to Christian students’ perceptions of themselves and their identity in relation to the larger University of the Midwest community, as well as their assessment of how writing instructors perceive them. Just as instructor perceptions are significant in shaping some of the choices that instructors make in their pedagogy and in their interactions with Christian students, student perceptions—of themselves as members of a public university community, of writing courses, and of their instructors—are significant in shaping the choices they make in the composition classroom.

As with instructors, the collection of data from a group of Christian students allows for the identification of patterns across student responses and for the formulation of hypotheses about how these students tend to think and talk about being a Christian at UM and in their writing courses. Though there have been studies, conducted by educational researchers, of Christian students (e.g. Bryant) and of undergraduate students’ ideas about religion/spirituality (e.g. Light; Small; Trautvetter), there is little in the way of composition scholarship that incorporates Christian students’ voices and their own comments and reflections on what being Christian means for their writing, their interactions with writing instructors, and their place in the campus community. When analysis of student data is put in conversation with scholarship in this chapter, then, it is to identify points of connection or discrepancy between it and the findings of these educational researchers, as well as much broader studies of college students and spirituality (e.g. HERI reports). The data analyzed here provides the field of composition studies a richer understanding of how these students are approaching their writing courses

and instructors. It also suggests that further research of this kind would be beneficial to a field still coming to terms with what students' religious discourses mean for composition theory and pedagogy.

The first part of this chapter describes Christian students' perceptions of their place within the larger UM community, which include notions about the ways in which Christian students feel ridiculed; perceived stereotypes of Christians; feelings about being part of a minority and/or diverse student population; and concerns about the fear and silence that sometimes surround religious devotion at a public university. Attention to this broader view of Christian student identity is important for two reasons: 1) it provides context for the perspectives, attitudes, and fears that students bring with them into their writing courses; and 2) it demonstrates how students' assumptions about and expectations of instructors can be shaped by their overall experiences as college students. Alyssa Bryant writes that evangelical Christian students⁴⁸ are "a constituency on today's college campus that has been known to exist in uneasy relationship with the secular academic milieu" (5), and a closer look at this "uneasy relationship" can aid in understanding the various forces that contribute to the challenges and conflicts that these students face in the writing classroom.

With students' perceptions of their place within the UM community as the backdrop, the second part of this chapter presents students' discussion of how they think that writing instructors view Christian students and Christianity. Students describe instructors as inclined to see Christian students as personally flawed, as biased against religious belief in general, and as predisposed toward a dichotomy between religious faith and academic work. Students' ideas about how instructors perceive them—impressions that may be influenced by their broader experiences as Christians at UM—reveal something about the assumptions that Christian students carry with them into composition courses and hint at ways in which these students might choose to include or exclude religious discourses in that context.

⁴⁸ Bryant defines "evangelical Christian students" by citing studies that "suggest that these students are 'countercultural conservatives' who develop a complex assemblage of political and social perspectives and experience college life in a way that is at once resistant, acclimating, and engaging—depending on the context" (1). Though I am not using the label "evangelical," and I am making no claims about students' political persuasions, Bryant's description of the "uneasy relationship" these students have to secular academic life certainly applies to the data collected from Christian students in this study.

Despite the seemingly tenuous nature of identifying as Christian at UM, and despite some students' portrayal of writing instructors as a group with a predominately negative attitude toward Christians and/or religious belief, some students see English departments—and writing courses specifically—as sites of opportunity for the inclusion and exploration of religious discourses. The final part of this chapter presents these students' understanding of writing courses as contexts that invite the discussion of personal belief and of writing instructors as friendly participants in/mediators of that discussion. Though the students with this perspective are not in the majority, they offer a significant and hopeful image of the composition classroom as a place in which multiple perspectives are welcomed and in which work with personal beliefs is rigorous and intellectually engaging.

Students' Perceptions of What it Means to be Christian at the University of the Midwest

Before talking to students about their experiences in the composition classroom, I asked them what it was like to be a Christian at the University of the Midwest. Writing courses are part of the larger university structure, and part of students' broader university experience; asking students to speak about Christianity in relation to both the composition course and UM more generally provides information about which issues are specific to the writing classroom and which are part of a broader framework, as well as insight into how the general campus environment might affect students' performance and decision-making in their writing courses.

Students took the question about being Christian at UM in many different directions, but there were some recurrent patterns of response regarding the ways in which students described their peers' and instructors' perceptions of Christian students and their own feelings of fear or discomfort related to disclosing their faith in an academic setting.

The following four parts of this section—"A Group You Can Make Fun Of," "Christian Stereotypes," "The Christian Minority?" and "Implications of Diversity"—represent patterns of response across students' discussion of what it means to be Christian

at UM. In each of these sections, students articulate their perceptions of the ways in which Christians are positioned (by instructors, peers, and institutional values) within the UM community. The final part, “Fear and Silence,” addresses students’ responses to this positioning and to uncertainty about how and if their Christian identity is valued.

A Group You Can Make Fun Of

In discussing the overall campus climate for Christian students, four different interviewed students—Grant, Isabelle, Rebecca, and Holly—note the social acceptability of making fun of or disrespecting Christians or Christianity. Grant, for example, cites the campus newspaper *The Daily Midwestern* as a frequent source of mockery. He recalls articles that discussed Christianity with biting sarcasm. Grant calls out *The Daily* as an example of the ‘they’ in his statement that “they think that we’re all like George Bush, like Nazis, like we’re all conservatives.” For Grant, the student-run campus newspaper appears to be a forum in which it is acceptable to mock or disrespect Christians or Christian belief.

He also implies an even stronger sense of disregard for his faith later in his interview, when he remarks, “It’s funny- I could take *The Daily* telling me that I’m an idiot or philosophy class telling me I’m an idiot all day long, but when you get those guys on the Diag, that’s the worst.” Grant’s comments about the Diag (the center of campus) will be revisited at a later point. The first part of his sentence, dismissed fairly casually by Grant (he could “take” that “all day long”), reveals one of the ways in which Grant interprets certain reactions to or statements about his belief system. *The Daily* is not just making fun of Christians; it is calling *him*—a particular Christian—an idiot. The philosophy class (and it’s interesting to note here that the subject is the *class*, not the instructor) is, in some way, calling him an idiot as well.

Grant does not seem overly concerned about being called an idiot; this is the only time it is mentioned, and it is mentioned here simply en route to what he sees as a much bigger problem (the preachers in the Diag). Even so, his statement is significant in how it positions Grant as a Christian within the campus community, and in what it can tell us about Christian students’ experiences with courses or people that challenge or disrespect

their beliefs. David Claerbaut argues that “faith-based concepts—the very bedrock of many students’ formative belief systems—are objects of ridicule and indicators of a lack of educational refinement” (34), and Grant seems to have experienced this kind of ridicule at the University of the Midwest. At the very least, he has *interpreted* some experiences as ridicule.

Isabelle, Holly, and Rebecca on the other hand, recall professors and students directly making fun of Christians or Christianity in the classroom. Isabelle, a neuroscience major, and Holly, a history major who has taken a number of science courses, are particularly attuned to the implicit or explicit divide imposed between faith and intellect (or faith and science). While Holly states that she “definitely” doesn’t think that religion and science are mutually exclusive, she observes an imposed “dichotomy and it’s enforced from both sides.” She points to both sides because scientists (specifically professors of science) will “make fun of Christians,” and Christians, who “feel like scientists think you’re stupid and everything,” may handle themselves poorly.

Isabelle remembers that on the first day of one of her required science courses, the professor “had [them] read an article about how science and God or science and religion can’t even coexist together” and then expressed support for the article. He informed the class that he was an atheist and “even made [his beliefs] part of the lecture.” The professor continued to “make little comments” about religion throughout the semester. When asked a follow-up question about her response to this professor, Isabelle says, “I didn’t take it seriously, but I- my friend, who is also Christian, I said to her, ‘Can you believe they’re actually, you know, saying that?’ or - I don’t know. So I guess I was a little bit offended.”

The reason for Isabelle’s rather muted response to the professor’s statements may be that she has come to expect that kind of thing. She may, as Lizabeth Rand suggests, feel that “antagonism toward religious faith is the only form of bigotry not banned from the classroom” (351). Isabelle argues that people “generalize Christianity in a certain way, and then I feel that it’s more made fun of.” When asked if she thought people made fun of Christians in general (as opposed to just those preaching in the *Diag*, for example),

her answer is simply, “Yeah.” She offers examples ranging from “a snicker or a comment about an organization” to “I hate all Christians” groups on Facebook.⁴⁹

Holly shares a story similar to Isabelle’s. In the semester during which the interview took place, she had a professor who was teaching about the formation of the Earth who would “sort of make fun of, you know, Christians that come, saying ‘I don’t believe in this’. And he has all these stories about that.” She compares this professor’s remarks to other experiences, saying, “It was just like a lot of what professors say seems to be an attack on Christians.” When asked how it felt to be a Christian sitting in the class when a professor makes a negative comment about Christianity or Christians, Holly says, “It’s really difficult, because there’s a couple people that will sort of egg him on with that, or they’ll bring up something and he’ll chime in.”

Unlike Isabelle’s science course, the course Holly refers to here was an upper-level, relatively small class. She remarks:

it’s kind of odd, because I wear a cross a lot in class and so does another girl, and so...I don’t know if he just doesn’t notice that, or he thinks that well, because we’re in this class, we must be, you know, ‘rational’ Christians—not like those people. So it [the comments/ joking about Christians] has been throughout the class, but otherwise he’s a very nice guy, and a good teacher, so...

Holly searches for potential explanations for her instructor’s comments, and she seems willing to allow him the benefit of the doubt. Her assumption, apparently, is that her instructor has made comments hurtful to her either because he does not realize that she is a Christian, or because he presumes her to be a particular *kind* of Christian.⁵⁰ Holly does not seem too upset by either of these possibilities (she merely finds the instructor’s comments “kind of odd”), but they do draw attention to the ways in which particular

⁴⁹ Though Facebook is clearly separate from the UM community, it was originally a social networking site specifically geared toward college students. At the time of Isabelle’s interview (early in 2007), Facebook users were still predominately college-age. Facebook usage has changed dramatically since then—2/3 of registered users are outside of college and the fastest growing demographic is users over 35—so the groups to which Isabelle refers might not have the same relevance to life as a college student as they did at the time of data collection. See <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?factsheet> and <http://www.newsweek.com/id/32261> (both accessed 6/15/09).

⁵⁰ I was struck by a number of instances in the data in which students seemed intent on not taking personal offense to instructors’ comments or actions and on not appearing to badmouth their instructors. Holly’s care in mentioning that her instructor was “a very nice guy and a good teacher” despite his comments and jokes about Christians is one such example.

students are positioned by an instructor's comments and/or assumptions about certain groups.

Rebecca has noted ridicule of Christianity and/or religion in courses that are not specifically engaged in a science/religion divide. She describes the dynamic of one of her art courses this way:

Yeah, it [instructor's comment mocking the idea of God] was *kind of* related to what he was teaching, but it was just irrelevant, it was unnecessary to be doing that. And all the art students would be like, "yeah!" like almost excited about that, and I'd be like, "Are you serious? That wasn't necessary." There's just-hatred almost. It's not necessary to be that way. I just feel like that's completely ridiculous. Some of the professors, even, I don't know- speak their beliefs in a way that's unrespect- or that they don't respect people, I don't know . . . A lot of them are uncomfortable with the idea of Christianity.

Rebecca highlights what she calls "almost" hatred coming from both her instructor and from other students in the class, and points out that many of her instructors are "uncomfortable" with Christianity. The atmosphere she depicts is one in which mocking religious beliefs is acceptable, and in which a Christian student might feel uncomfortable revealing that part of their identity.

Though what Isabelle, Holly and Rebecca discuss involves specific examples of particular courses, professors, and students, their stories come together to paint a picture of UM as an environment in which Christian students are likely to encounter ridicule of their beliefs at some point, because professors and students appear free to mock Christians or religion in general without fear of negative repercussions. This picture is filled in by Grant's perspective on the widely distributed campus newspaper, and supported by those outside UM who claim that secular college campuses are particularly hostile to Christianity (Claerbaut; Fox-Genovese; Marsden; Nye). The students quoted here are reflecting on particular experiences, but it stands to reason that these experiences contribute to and shape the ways that students think about their place as Christians at UM.

If making fun of Christians or Christianity is perceived by Christian students as an accepted practice for their peers and faculty at UM, those students may feel that they hold a somewhat tenuous position in the UM community. One can imagine, for instance, how Holly, Isabelle, Rebecca, and Grant might, like the Christian students that Alyssa Bryant

studied on another campus, begin to see ways in which “the broader university community [is] at odds with [their] values and beliefs,” and question how their identity as Christians fits into that community (10). Though some writers, like Scott Jaschik, report “that while there are plenty of non-religious professors around, they aren’t trying to discourage any students from practicing their faith,” these students’ stories do suggest an atmosphere in which students might feel actively discouraged from practicing their faith.

Stereotypes of Christians

Perhaps linked to the acceptability of making fun of Christians is the stereotyping that Christian students appear to encounter at UM. Student participants express frustration about what they interpret as unfair assumptions and they voice anxiety about their lack of control over how others might view them. Even as they resist or challenge stereotypes, however, some students note the ways in which Christians themselves contribute to the circulation of common stereotypes.

All but one student interviewee raised the issue of stereotyping, though the kinds of stereotypes that respondents pointed to varied. Theresa, for example, argues that she has noticed “paralleling all white people with Christians,” a stereotype she questions because she has “a very, very, very multi-ethnic group of friends, a majority of whom are very strong Christians from all different backgrounds.”⁵¹ Much more frequently cited, however, was stereotyping of Christians according to conservative political leanings or a judgmental attitude toward others, and both of these stereotypes seem related to the social acceptability of making fun of or dismissing Christian ideas.

Grant argues that an association with particular political perspectives is one way in which Christianity is not respected in certain arenas (again using *The Daily* as an example). As noted previously, Grant claims that Christians tend to be stereotyped as staunch conservatives. It is clear from his statement that “conservative” is applied in a decidedly negative way, as it is associated with the frequently criticized Bush and placed in context with Nazis.

⁵¹ Though the issue of race was not raised often, it should be noted that two instructor survey respondents mentioned race when they answered the question “What characteristics come to mind when you think of Christian students?” One included “white” and the other included “Asian/minority descent.”

Holly shares an experience with a similar, though less provocative, kind of stereotyping. During a course on Religions in Latin America, she learned about liberation theology (a leftist Christian line of thinking, often associated with Paolo Freire), and she found many connections between it and what she was learning in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.⁵² When she mentioned some of these connections to her professor during office hours, she recalls him saying, “Oh, I always assumed, you know, I’ve always thought of InterVarsity as sort of a conservative movement.” She expresses frustration with how polarized many issues become, and with the assumption that Christians will fall on one end of the spectrum on every issue. She says, “I don’t think instructors understand that. I think they understand the concepts of, you know, the religious right and religious left, but not that most people aren’t either.”⁵³

Theresa expresses similar frustration, and notes that even within her group of Christian friends and family, there is a range of political belief—and there is accommodation for a range of political belief. Theresa does, however, hold Christians partly accountable for the ways in which they are stereotyped. She remembers feeling afraid at times to “voice [her] more liberal opinions” to the Christian student group because they are sometimes looked down upon. She also wonders if “maybe it’s easier if you agree with the stereotypical Christian [than] to voice your opinion in that sense

⁵²InterVarsity Christian Fellowship is an “evangelical and interdenominational campus ministry” with groups established on college campuses across the United States (as described on the ministry’s homepage, www.intervarsity.org, accessed 4/7/09).

⁵³ Others in the Christian community appear aware of the potential political stereotypes placed on it from the outside. Chi Alpha Christian fellowship (also called H2O), a religious organization at the University of the Midwest, includes the following question in their FAQ list on their website: “Are you guys a bunch of right-wing, close-minded, bigoted, judgmental and hypocritical Christians?” This question appears alongside more typical questions such as “Where and when do you meet?” The response emphasizes inclusiveness, and acknowledges some of the damage done by religion wielded in the wrong way. Their response to the question is:

“We believe that Jesus Christ loves everyone, and he died on the cross to prove it. Because of his example, we also strive to love every student at UM, regardless of who they are, what they've done or where they're going.

For too long, sincere spiritual seekers have been turned off from Jesus because of the hatred and hypocrisy they've seen in professing Christians. We believe this should change. Our goal in H2O is not to ram the Bible down your throat, and prove how wrong you are. Our dream is to show you how beautiful and good Jesus Christ really is. We believe that when you see how wonderful Christ is, you'll receive his love for you, just as we have.

Are you a spiritual seeker? You're welcome in H2O. Are you a skeptic who has genuine questions about problems and/or contradictions [*sic*] you see in the Bible? You're welcome in H2O.

We hope that you'll find a safe and open environment in h2o where you can be yourself, and ask those questions you've always wanted to ask!”

because it's not like you're going outside the lines that have already been set for you." Theresa acknowledges the doubly restrictive aspect of stereotyping here, noting a stereotype's ability to shape "insider" action as well as outsider perception. Like Bryant in her observations of Christian students, Theresa seems to have witnessed Christian students who have "endeavored to both differentiate their religious selves from stereotypical representations of evangelical Christianity and perform or behave in ways that consistently reflect that identity" (2). Her statement also hints at the risk, or at least discomfort, of pushing against stereotype.

Along with the pervasiveness of the "conservative" stereotype, one of the stereotypes that seems to offend Christian students most is the stereotype of Christians as judgmental or even hateful—a stereotype exemplified and perpetuated by those they see either as "posing" as Christians or approaching Christianity in a horribly twisted way. At the University of the Midwest, the worst offenders of this sort seem to be the "preachers in the Diag"—lay people, generally male, who stand in the center of campus with Bible in hand and yell admonishments to passing students. Quinn recalls a dramatic and unsettling experience he had as he passed a preacher in the Diag:

My story about that is that I saw—this was the epitome of why people hate Christianity . . .so like we had those guys that say, like, 'God hates fags' and this guy was, had his Bible in one hand and telling women who walked by, going 'prostitutes, close your legs', that was ridiculous. So I'm walking through the Diag, first of all I feel filthy for saying that I follow the same person as them. And then I walk out and there's a guy . . . there's a dude, a homeless man, probably passed out, and I had to sit down and like pray because I was so insulted or I was just- 'what would Jesus be doing right now? Would he be in the Diag telling people they're going to hell or would he be helping this man?'

Quinn was disturbed by what this man in the Diag said to passing students, and he was disturbed by the sight of someone needy being ignored just a few yards away, but he was also deeply disturbed by the fact that he could be associated with the preacher in the Diag, that they would appear to "follow the same person." He claims elsewhere in his interview that what he sees in the Diag is something "to be rejected," but he has little control over how others might forge connections between him and that which he rejects.

In this case, the stereotype of the judgmental Christian springs from Christians themselves (or at least from people presenting themselves as Christians), and this may be

why Grant says that “those guys on the Diag, that’s the worst”—worse than being made fun of, worse than being put into a political pigeonhole. What Christian students seem to fear is that the highly public nature of these few people’s religious views will cause others to view all Christians in this way. In an environment that values tolerance, this stereotype is a particularly damaging one.

The fact that nearly all interviewed students raised the issue of stereotyping without being prompted in that direction speaks to the significance of stereotypes to these students as they consider how their Christian identity affects their participation in the UM community. The lack of power they have (or feel they have) over people’s perceptions of them contributes to a feeling that being Christian at UM involves a certain amount of risk and requires a willingness to explain oneself.

The Christian Minority?

Students had differing responses to the interview question, “Do you think that Christian students are a minority at University of the Midwest?” Theresa, Quinn, Grant, and Isabelle all answered “yes”—though Isabelle later qualified that response. Jamie and Rebecca said “yes and no” and then explained the seeming contradiction. Their discussion of minority status sometimes had more to do with *feeling* like a minority than believing themselves to be a statistically small population. Official recognition as a minority seemed unimportant to student respondents; what mattered to them were the implications that minority status (or a sense of minority status) held for their interactions with peers and faculty and their freedom to disclose their Christian identity.

Whether or not Christian students are a minority at UM cannot be definitively stated, as the question depends on how one defines “Christian”; however, knowing for certain whether or not Christian students are a minority population ultimately isn’t the most important factor in this study. The essential question is how students and instructors deal with what Christian students bring with them into the classroom, regardless of their campus-wide representation. Still, responses to questions about a possible “Christian minority” reveal one dimension of students’ perspectives on their

place in the broader UM community, and how feeling like a minority factors into their social and academic participation.

The issue of Christians and minority status is relevant to broader conversations about the relationship of Christianity to higher education as well. Questions surrounding categorization—and the issues of power these questions invoke—contribute to the ways in which students, faculty, and scholars frame their discussion of Christianity and higher education. For those who see Christians as a dominant and undeniable force inside and outside of university walls, concern about the challenges Christian students face at public universities may seem unwarranted, even ridiculous (Hollinger 41). For those who identify Christian students as a relatively small, maligned presence on college campuses, concern for the challenges these students face is both warranted and crucial (Claerbaut 44; Fox-Genovese 39; Lindsay B14; Marsden 33-34; Noll 161).

Grant and Quinn both answered a confident “yes” that Christian students *are* a minority at UM, and the two offer similar explanations for the seeming discord between a Christian minority and a campus on which students claiming Christian as their primary religious identification are a majority. When I asked Grant how he would respond to claims that Christians are, in fact, the vast majority at a place like the University of the Midwest, he said:

There’s a difference between like culturally Christian, just like there’s a difference between culturally Jewish . . . you know, if someone would say ‘I’m Jewish,’ well now many times, you know, like how are you Jewish. In the fact that your mom and dad are Jewish? Like that’s how you’re Jewish. That’s how people are Christian. True, true that I would bet- don’t they say 95 percent of Americans believe in God or- yeah, whatever. . . but as far as people who are actively following Jesus, definitely not, not a majority.

For Grant, Christianity (or Judaism, for that matter) may just be a kind of inheritance from one’s parents or wider culture, rather than a personal, deeply held belief system. Grant concedes that a majority of students would likely claim Christianity when asked to cite their religion, but argues that the number for which Christianity is a significant, life-shaping factor—the number of students who are “actively” Christian—is much smaller.

Quinn voices a similar perspective:

I would agree that a lot of people identify themselves as Christians, which is tough because I can see that that would be hard writing a dissertation or this sort of paper because there is a difference between people who identify themselves as Christians and people who are seeking after Christ, I think. And yeah, at Midwest there probably are a lot of people that say they're Christians, but it's just a, just a word, a term.

Like Grant, Quinn makes a distinction between those who claim Christian faith in a personal way and those who claim it more nominally. The distinction that Grant and Quinn make between types of Christian may be reflected in recent student demographic information collected at UM. The CIRP survey⁵⁴ distributed to incoming students at UM in 2007 reveals that while 55.3% of students identify as Christian (including Protestant and Catholic denominations), only 11.3% responded in the affirmative to the question “Do you consider yourself a born-again Christian?” and 5.3% to the question “Do you consider yourself an evangelical Christian?”⁵⁵ Given that there were most likely students who answered “yes” to *both* follow-up questions (because many evangelicals would also describe themselves as “born-again”), these numbers stand in stark contrast to the statistical Christian majority. If evangelical and born-again Christians are typically viewed as the more “hard core” kind of Christian, then Grant and Quinn make an important point in distinguishing a devoted Christian minority from a more nominal Christian majority.⁵⁶

Isabelle also argues that Christian students are a minority, but adds that there may be “more than you think.” She notes that “some people aren’t- they don’t- maybe they don’t feel like they can express it and still hold onto maybe their social groups or their- Or maybe there’s just a little fear that goes with it.” Fear, Isabelle says, stems from wanting to be accepted and from a feeling that one should agree with the instructor to get

⁵⁴ CIRP stands for “Cooperative Institutional Research Program,” which is part of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. The CIRP survey is distributed to incoming freshmen at approximately 700 colleges and universities in the United States.

⁵⁵ These follow-up questions to the one asking students to select their primary religious identity from a list appeared on the 2007 CIRP survey. The “born-again” question appeared alone on the 2004 survey. Neither question appears on the 2008 or 2009 surveys.

⁵⁶ This is not to say that students outside of the evangelical or born-again categories cannot be strongly committed to their religious beliefs; rather, I am claiming that consciously taking on the label of evangelical or born-again almost certainly signals strong religious commitment, as a particular kind of devotion is woven into the terms. This is tricky territory, of course, as these labels can be used by various groups to mean different things. I do, however, think it is relatively safe to say that those taking on the labels of evangelical and/or born again tend to approach Christianity from a traditional standpoint, one that contributes to the kinds of tensions and challenges addressed in this study.

good grades. Though she states that she does not think that most students are Christian, Isabelle seems less confident in the actual numbers than do Grant and Quinn. What she does seem sure of is that being a Christian on campus comes with some anxiety about one's relationship to faculty and to other students.

Isabelle adds another perspective on the majority/minority issue later in her interview. She says, "So among the total population of students, I would say Christian organizations and Christians are in the minority. Among religious groups, I would say Christianity is the majority." This is an observation that points to the complexity of determining whether or not to think of Christian students as a minority; if one looks simply at the number of Christian student religious groups compared to groups for students of other faiths, Christianity would certainly appear to be the dominant presence on campus.⁵⁷ Stepping back and looking at the University as a whole, however, may present a different picture.

Jamie and Rebecca offer similarly complex statements about the Christian "minority." Jamie, in discussing the climate for Christians at the University of the Midwest, says, "I don't think it's negative but I don't know, it's- I just, sometimes I just feel like it's- the minority, which is weird because it's- I mean there's, it's most likely not a minority." Jamie points out the distinction between what being a Christian on campus *feels* like and what the actual numbers might be. She says that she knows that there are many different churches and groups for Christians around, but that outside of actually being in church, she feels somewhat alone in her beliefs. She says, "I have a few friends who are Muslim, and then I have- and the rest of my friends are atheists . . . And so with that restricted environment, I'm not really seeing other people with my beliefs."⁵⁸

There is a disconnect, it seems, between Jamie's lived experiences as a Christian student and the assumptions one might make about being a Christian student. Rebecca struggles with this incongruity as well. When asked if she thought of Christian students as a minority on campus, she responds, "I wouldn't say that they're the minority.

⁵⁷ There are over 25 undergraduate Christian student organizations at the University of the Midwest, but only 3 Jewish student organizations, 2 Buddhist organizations, 3 Islam organizations, 1 Sikh organization, and 1 Baha'i organization.

⁵⁸ Jamie's statement raises the question of how much students' responses are shaped by their personal/social interactions as opposed to experiences directly related to UM as an institution. The social/institutional line is blurry, because undergraduate students' social lives are so closely tied to the institution via residence halls, cafeterias, student organizations, college sports, and their classes.

Although, um- ah...I don't know. There are a lot of beliefs at Midwest. So diverse. I definitely don't see them [Christians] in large numbers here, but I think there are more than I think there are."

Though there is much ambiguity here, these seven students seem to see the question of minority status as relevant to their experiences as Christians at UM. As demonstrated by instructors' comments in Chapter 3, issues of dominance and vulnerability factor into the ways that instructors view Christian students and into their struggles to communicate with these students about their work. For students, the prospect of being a minority at UM—especially a minority that is stereotyped and made fun of—may influence how students choose to express or silence their religious beliefs in various university contexts and how they respond to critiques of religious discourses.

Implications of Diversity

It is clear from the responses above that the issue of diversity plays into Christian students' sense of themselves and their place in the UM community, and that is understandable, given UM's prioritization of diversity issues.⁵⁹ Five of the seven student interviewees acknowledged the diversity of belief at the University of the Midwest as a factor that shaped their experience as a Christian on campus. As noted previously, Rebecca had difficulty answering the question about whether or not Christians were a minority on campus, remarking, "I don't know, there are a lot of beliefs at Midwest. So diverse." Diversity of belief made her *feel* like Christians were a minority, but she was uncomfortable declaring that with certainty.

Diversity of belief can be experienced in different ways, depending on the stance one takes toward it. Quinn, who stated clearly that (active) Christians are, in fact, a minority, views religious diversity as both a positive and negative force that simultaneously offers a productive challenge and an element of discomfort or self-doubt. He says:

⁵⁹ The University web site contains statements about how the institution prioritizes diversity, and that prioritization is reflected in campus resources, course offerings, and institutional positions on policies and initiatives that affect diversity.

I feel like the unique thing about U of M is you never really know what another person's beliefs are. Like somebody could be Muslim, somebody could be Hindu. You just never- you don't know . . . Just because there's such a diverse body at Midwest. And in some ways that's cool, that's neat to be around people like that. If we're not we're just in a little bubble. But at the same time, it's not comforting knowing that I could be in a class with no one with the same beliefs as me . . . So I guess U of M's dynamics is good and bad. I mean, it's good because you have the opportunity, but it's bad because that support is not always there.

On the one hand, Quinn thinks it is “neat” to be around people of other faiths, and even notes the downside of *not* encountering people of other faiths—the risk of “living in a bubble.” On the other hand, he notes that a very diverse student body means the increased possibility of being (or at least feeling) alone. Diversity, then, can mean an opportunity to get outside of the bubble, but it can also mean an atmosphere that is “not comforting,” where support from others like you is “not always there.” Quinn seems both enamored by diversity and wary of its implications.

Grant exhibits a much more straightforward opinion of diversity. He says, “I like being at U of M because of the diversity . . . I think it's much more important to my faith and I grow much more when I'm in the minority.” For Grant, diversity is part of the draw of the University of the Midwest because it challenges him in his own faith. Grant, who claimed that (active) Christians were in the minority, relishes the position because it holds him “accountable” to following his beliefs “even when it's difficult.” The difficulty that Grant talks about seems to stem directly from the diversity of beliefs present at the University. He uses the example of Christians in China—who he says are a distinct minority, face official persecution, but are nonetheless fiercely devoted to their faith—as a way of illustrating how diversity encourages him to stand firm in his religious beliefs.⁶⁰ The link he makes between diversity and persecution here is worth noting, because it incorporates diversity into a conversation about real danger, about forces seeking to stamp out particular ideologies. Intentionally or not, Grant has equated diversity with institutionalized discrimination.

⁶⁰ Though Grant uses this example as he discusses diversity, the persecution of Chinese Christians is not a result of diversity. I believe that Grant is using this as an extreme example of how being surrounded by those who do not think like you do and who may be hostile to your way of thinking can foster personal and communal growth.

This move may have been easy to make because Grant in some ways positions Christianity outside of religious diversity. Diversity, it seems, is a force that acts on him and his beliefs, as opposed to an element of campus life that encompasses his beliefs. It is not surprising that a college student would interpret diversity in this way; it is reasonable to expect that many students, especially those who represent a racial or cultural majority, would think of diversity primarily as that which is “other,” and perhaps as something that puts their own identities or interests at risk in some way (Trainor 639). This conception of diversity was not shared by all the student participants, however. One survey respondent writes that they sometimes share their religious views in the classroom in order to “contribute to diversity.” This kind of statement is a clear indication that the student feels *part* of the diversity on campus, rather than outside of it.

Isabelle offers a more complicated perspective on diversity in relation to Christianity. She argues that *most* people don’t think of Christianity as part of a diverse student body, and that allows them the freedom to make fun of Christians. She says, “I think that almost why they do [make fun of Christians], because diversity implies ‘different,’ and if Christianity is the original norm, it’s not that you’re being diverse, it’s that you’re sticking with the norm.” Isabelle picks up on the important point that Christianity was the institutionalized ideological norm on most college campuses until relatively recently. If David Hollinger is correct that “academia [has been] emancipated from a Protestant hegemony, the evils of which surely require no belaboring” (47-8), then it makes sense that Christianity would continue to be cast as the norm from which higher education has purposefully deviated. What that means for individual Christian students, however, is that their beliefs come with historical baggage that is difficult to drag into a diverse, multicultural environment.

It also means a struggle to understand how one can hold Christian beliefs *and* be a part of the broader academic community. Most students did not appear to feel that the two were mutually exclusive (though a few mentioned professors who seemed to think so), but many faced having to reconcile their beliefs with courses that offered specific challenges to those beliefs. Isabelle claims, “diversity here means thinking outside of what we’ve thought for so long.” In her science courses, she has encountered faculty members who ridicule the idea of belief in God, and Isabelle wonders if the critique of

religious belief is part of embracing diversity. She says, “So maybe diversity equals, you know, when we’re here we’re trying to- through man’s means, trying to figure out so many things.” In other words, diversity means adopting a naturalistic worldview in science, rather than a deistic one, which “we’ve thought for so long.”

When students talk about diversity, they are in some ways talking about their sense of fit with institutional priorities, and therefore their position within that institution. They recognize the benefits of a diverse community, but also seem uncertain about how their own ways of knowing fit into the model of diversity they see at UM. Christianity, it seems, can be viewed as a part of diversity, or as the norm against which diversity works.

Fear and Silence

Given students’ apprehension and uncertainty about diversity and about the position of Christians and Christianity at UM, it comes as no surprise that these students sometimes feel fearful about how their religious beliefs will affect them in their social and academic interactions. All but two student interviewees mention fear as part of their experience as a Christian student at the University of the Midwest. Though their fear apparently stems from different specific points of anxiety, much of what students feared was related to potential effects their faith might have on their intellectual and social relationships with classmates and faculty.

For example, Theresa, Quinn, Isabelle, and three student survey respondents point to fear of not being accepted as a factor that goes into deciding whether or not to disclose one’s Christian identity. One surveyed student writes that their decision to identify as Christian or not “totally depends on the instructor” because some instructors “regard Christianity as a sign of ignorance and backwardness.” Theresa says, “There is a fear of not being accepted for who you are or being expected to silence that part of yourself when you’re around certain people” and Isabelle says that some Christian students may not be open about their faith because “they don’t feel like they can express it and still hold onto, maybe, their social groups.”

Though none of the respondents indicate exactly why Christians might not be accepted, the prospect of dredging up other people’s negative associations with

Christianity seems to have something to do with it. Theresa, Grant and Isabelle note the role that others' experiences with religion or with particular Christians can play in their reaction to a student identifying as Christian. Theresa comments:

I think it really depends on your personal experience . . . if someone hears that and they've had this really awful experience with the church, then they're not going to want to really associate with you because they're going to associate you with that. Going to college, for a lot of people, myself included, is a huge step of wanting to be accepted even more than you ever were in your life among your peers.

Grant concurs, claiming that "the word 'religion' in general just has a bad reputation" and that people may see you as "weak, you give in to that, you need religion" if you identify as Christian. Isabelle notes that "if you're labeling yourself Christian you're putting yourself in a group with someone else who they have only had one view of what is Christianity." She goes on to say that their view of Christianity may be very different from what the Christian student wants to identify with. What all three respondents point to here is a lack of control over how the label "Christian" (or even just "religious") will be interpreted by their peers and instructors.

Rebecca also experiences discomfort when she gets into discussions about her faith with others on campus. She says:

[Some people] really want to get into deep conversation, they want to argue. Which is really intimidating, too, because I know that I don't know as much as I should, and a lot of people around here are smart, and they'll start throwing things at me . . . I feel a lot of times that I'm not equipped enough . . . I just have a hard time getting out what I mean, so when I talk to people that's one of my big concerns, that I'll say something I don't mean, that it comes off the wrong way, or that I'm presenting my faith in a poor way. I just get really insecure about that . . . I definitely do get scared, because I don't think I'm the wisest person alive.

Rebecca is a student who regularly seeks out discussions of faith, and yet she experiences a great deal of anxiety around her own ability to articulate her beliefs and to present her faith in a positive way. Like Isabelle, Rebecca seems nervous about the questions that her peers may (and have) come up with; the way that this nervousness is expressed positions Isabelle and Rebecca on the defensive, rather than as mere participants in a conversation. The fear, it seems, is born out of feeling that one must persuade others that

their beliefs make sense. Michael Lindsay argues that many Christians in the academic world “simply want their faith to be seen as reasonable, genuine, and attractive” (B14), and Isabelle and Rebecca appear to struggle with that very desire as they make decisions about sharing their beliefs with others.

Fear of causing trouble or of entering contested territory was one reason offered by two other respondents. Holly, for example, notes a kind of “live and let live” attitude toward religion on campus, and feels that:

people are fine with Christians being Christians, but they aren't fine with evangelism and things like that. As long as Christians stay, you know, as long as they don't let their religion seep out and try to change other people, I think most people are fine with that.

Holly's statement conveys both a sense of religious tolerance and of religious restriction. People are fine with Christians, she says, but only if they don't take it too far. The idea of letting one's religion “seep out” calls up images of repression; on the other hand, it is easy to understand how “evangelism” would make others uncomfortable. Finding the middle ground for religious expression could be a difficult task—where is the line between sharing one's faith as part of a conversation and “evangelism”? When is silence appropriate and when is it oppressive?

According to Theresa, choosing silence over disclosure is sometimes the easier choice for religious students. She says, “people don't talk about spiritual things much, unless they're in a really safe environment.” Her claim is echoed in Claerbaut's recollection of his own experience in college. He writes, “We [students at the author's religiously-affiliated college] remained silent, I suspect, out of fear of appearing simplistic and naïve. The atmosphere simply did not seem to invite such blatant workings out of faith and learning” (15). Most college courses, Theresa says, don't constitute a safe environment, though there are a few exceptions.

Safe environments, according to Theresa, are ones in which professors make it clear that they want to hear students' points of view. Those points of view, in turn, are supported and respected, regardless of the differing opinions held by others in the class. It is a place where participants are “talking as people relating to other people.” Theresa does not provide the (less safe) counterpart to talking this way, but one can gather from

her description that it would involve a more top-down authority structure in which not everyone's point of view would be respected.

There are other clues about what an unsafe environment looks and feels like in Theresa's description. By implication, an unsafe classroom is a place where a student does not necessarily feel supported and/or respected by their peers and instructor; where criticism or questions may not be delivered in a respectful way; and where a professor may not be interested in what students really think. The description of an unsafe space is as important as the description of the safe space, because Theresa claims that most college classrooms fall into the "unsafe" category.

Theresa's take on most classroom environments may be influenced by some instructors' tendency to avoid religion altogether. According to a survey respondent, instructors "try to avoid the issue of faith." Another writes, "When Christianity was mentioned, the teacher avoided the topic after making claims that there is too much controversy with the books of Genesis and their inconsistency." These student comments do seem to reflect what some instructors acknowledge in their surveys and interviews as a desire to keep religious discussions out of the classroom as much as possible. Silence, in this case, is not self-imposed by students; this is silence created by instructors' apparent unwillingness to address issues of religion.

Scholarship suggests that when religion *is* discussed, it is often treated as a remote subject of study, rather than as something that "shapes how some faculty and students understand the world" (Edwards 1). While a distanced approach to the study of religion may seem logical for a secular academic setting, some criticize this approach as too dismissive of religion as a legitimate source of identity and belief. Claerbaut argues that students are "directed to study religion in a wholly dispassionate and empirical fashion. Because the very possibility of there being a genuinely transcendent, supernatural entity is totally dismissed, there is no incentive to examine more deeply the truth or error of the various belief systems" (49). In other words, the "deep" conversations that Rebecca and others are looking for are cut off before they begin.

The students' observations of the silence around spiritual issues and their apparent desire for more engaged discussion of "deeper things" are affirmed by recent scholarship about college students and spirituality. Several studies indicate that college students are

looking for opportunities to explore questions of spirituality and meaning as part of their higher education.⁶¹ Barbara Walvoord, for example, argues that “[m]any college students are interested in spirituality and the ‘big questions’ about life’s meaning and values, but many professors seem not to know how to respond to that interest.” Walvoord cites a 2004 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) study that found a disconnect between students’ desire to discuss issues of meaning and spirituality/religion and their opportunities to do so at college. According to the study, incoming students “place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping them develop personal values, and encouraging their expression of spirituality” (qtd in Walvoord, A22). Yet the majority of a sample of college juniors reported that their professors had never provided opportunities for this kind of expression or exploration.

Lois Calian Trautvetter offers a similar critique of the rift between what both students and faculty claim as important goals of higher education and what kinds of work actually get done on campus. She cites HERI surveys from 2005 and 2006 in which a majority of students express a desire to “associate with faculty who are willing to assist them in their search for meaning and purpose” and a majority of faculty state that they “believe it is important to enhance students’ self-understanding and to develop moral character and values” (33). Something interrupts the movement from intention to application, however, and that something appears to be confusion about how to include spirituality in a meaningful and appropriate way. Trautvetter writes:

Spiritual and religious development often has not been included as a component of a holistic approach to students. More recently, the terms faith, spirituality, religious commitment, character, and vocation are now common terms in the literature on college student development (e.g., Astin, 2004; Chickering et al., 2006; Fowler, 1981; Love, 2002; Parks, 2000), as well as society, in general; yet, they tend to be avoided on college campuses for fear of overstepping boundaries or offending students (35).

⁶¹ More is at stake than students’ desire to share their faith. Stanley Fish, in his article “One University, Under God?”, claims that religion is becoming increasingly important in the culture at large, and argues that the academy needs to be prepared to discuss religion in terms of truths, not just as an object of study. He claims that students are searching for guidance, and points to the importance that issues of faith have had in the broader cultural/political arena (e.g., the 2004 election).

The patterns of response across and within the categories outlined above reveal a sense of uncertainty about Christian students' place in the UM academic community and the larger student body, and about the implications of disclosing Christian identity in various academic contexts. As in Bryant's study, student participants in this study offer narratives marked by "themes of negotiating one's place and identity within shifting community contexts" and concern about whether it is "safe or feasible" to express their religious identities in their academic lives (20, 22).

It is important to recognize that some Christian students are witnessing the ridicule or stereotyping of Christians (or interpreting certain experiences as such), not only because public universities have an interest in fostering a comfortable atmosphere for the entire student body, but more specifically because these events or interpretations of events may affect students' engagement in their courses. How can they be expected to adhere to academic norms and to meet an instructor's expectations when their experience tells them that they are not the norm, that they exist somehow outside of the academic community?

For the same reason, diversity has important implications for how students feel about their place at the University, and how they might think about their position in a writing course. The issue of diversity forces students to identify themselves in relation to a large multicultural community—which may or may not appear receptive to their beliefs—and find ways to be a part of that community while remaining committed to their religious identity. The question of minority status complicates the issue, because it raises the question of how much power Christian students have to stake a place in the community and have that place recognized by others.

Students Consider & Describe Writing Instructors' Perceptions of Them

Writing courses, and the instructors who teach them, are parts of the UM community described by Christian students, and therefore factor into students' assessments of the Christian student experience there. After respondents described their experiences as Christian students at UM, they were asked to describe more specifically

how they thought that writing instructors thought about them, and these descriptions are likely influenced by the expectations and assumptions attached to students' sense of fit at UM. Student perception of *instructor* perception of them can affect students' attitudes toward their classes and instructors, what information they choose to disclose, and how they engage with assignments and course activities (Claerbaut 15; Trautvetter 41). In addition, student perceptions offer a point of comparison to instructors' own descriptions of their perceptions of Christian students, discussed in the previous chapter.⁶²

Many students seemed to expect (or had experienced) a fairly negative reaction to their faith from instructors, though some noted that it varied by instructor. When asked "How do you think that writing instructors think about Christian students? What gives you that impression?" 59% of survey respondents claimed (or speculated) that instructors thought about Christian students in negative ways (as naïve, ill-informed, biased, ignorant). Students seemed to assume that their writing instructors were *not* Christians and that instructors would be wary of any kind of religious discourse in academic work. Where students who cited instructors' negative perceptions of Christian students differed most sharply was in their description of the source of instructors' negative perceptions. For some, it was personal disdain or bias against religious beliefs. For others, it was a staunch unwillingness to engage with religious belief in the classroom.

Answers to the survey question "How do you think writing instructors think about Christian students?" were divided roughly into thirds across three categories: nearly one-third (short by two) of the respondents gave answers indicating biases against Christians on a personal level; one-third⁶³ responded that instructors were biased against religious perspectives or simply did not want to engage with religion in class; and the rest of the respondents gave some version of "it depends"—on the instructor, on the class, on the student's academic ability—or "I don't know."⁶⁴

⁶² Though students were asked to discuss writing instructors specifically—and their responses highlight issues particular to composition courses—it is worth keeping in mind how students' more general notions of what it means to be Christian at UM may influence their ideas about writing instructors/courses.

⁶³ As close to one-third as can be with a division of 41 students into thirds. Exactly one-third is 13.6666667; 13 students responded in this way.

⁶⁴ Of those saying "it depends," 4 students reported individual instructors who responded positively to their religious discourses.

Christian Students as Personally Flawed

Nearly one-third of the student survey respondents speculated that writing instructors had a negative impression of Christian students on a personal level—more specifically, the impression that Christians were naïve, ignorant, or close-minded. The following responses, for example, all focus on instructors’ presumed views of Christian students’ academic or intellectual deficiencies:

I think they view the students as naïve and ill-informed, in need of more knowledge.

They think that they are less adventurous in their writing, and narrow-minded.

I think instructors think Christians are ignorant or gullible. Writing instructors that I have had tend to believe they know all and know better than to be coaxed into believing a “myth.”

Maybe sheltered, opinionated, wrong, don’t really know what they are talking about, ignorant.

I think they think that Christian students are well-meaning but horribly misguided and perhaps even delusional.

All of these responses cast instructors as condescending to Christian students, and certainly as a group that claims the intellectual high ground—they “know all and know better” than to hold to the Christian “myth”; they can recognize those who are “well-meaning but horribly misguided”; and they have the power to separate the ignorant from the knowledgeable. The range of response that students ascribe to instructors is broad, from thinking that Christian students are “in need of more knowledge” to seeing them as “delusional.” All responses operate on the same spectrum of thought, however: there is something wrong with Christian students.

From this perspective, students may fear that instructors have judged Christians as a group before they can know individual Christian students well enough to determine their academic ability. One student appears to have had just that experience, writing, “I think my prof. ultimately thought I was a mindful, reflective student, but I felt like I had to prove myself to them.” In other words, this student felt that they had to overcome the prejudices that entered the classroom with them—a “guilty until proven innocent” scenario. Like the students who recall professors making fun of Christians or

Christianity, this student felt that they had an obstacle to overcome right from the start of their relationship with their instructor.

Most students did not provide specific examples of this kind of instructor attitude toward Christian students, and one, in fact, noted that they were speculating based on a *sense* of how things were, rather than actual interaction with the instructor. This student writes, “I had a very liberal English teacher who most likely would have looked down upon the apparent ‘narrowness’ of Christian values. However, I didn’t ask her so this is just what I think.” In this case, the student has made an assumption about the instructor’s attitude toward Christian students based on that instructor’s political leanings. Worth noting here is Holly’s complaint in relation to stereotypes, when she expressed frustration about instructors making this same kind of assumption about the connection between students’ religious faith and their political views—the student here is also assuming a correlation between politics and religious belief, based on information from only one of those categories.

In addition, three student interviewees—Isabelle, Holly, and Rebecca—mention instructor bias against Christian students. For example, Isabelle claims more than once that instructors tend to view Christian students as close-minded. Holly notes that “a lot of what professors say seems to be an attack on Christians,” creating a difficult learning environment for students who identify as such. She also remarks that instructors tend to make unfair assumptions about Christian students. For example, she says:

if they heard that the student was defining themselves as a Christian student and not just a student who happens to be Christian, they might expect the person to be really confrontational with them about issues, that they would, I guess, constantly be bringing their religious beliefs up, in every discussion, every comment.

Just like instructors’ assumptions about Christian students’ political beliefs, Holly says, this kind of thinking pigeonholes Christian students and demonstrates instructors’ lack of understanding about Christianity and the range of possibility within it.

For these students, instructor bias is real—or at least feels real—and it is personal. The perception of instructors as seeing Christian students as personally flawed may be an enormous weight for students to bear as they enter the writing classroom. If students feel marked in some way based simply on their religious identity, it is difficult to see how

most of them would be able to engage with the instructor and the work of the course openly and productively.

Instructor Bias Against Religious Perspectives

A full third of the forty-one student survey respondents seemed to feel that instructors were not so much prejudiced against Christians or Christian students as they were wary of religious expression and perhaps biased against any religious perspectives in the classroom. Grant says, “I don’t think that it’s anything against our religion, it’s just against how we communicate ourselves or something like that.” The other students whose responses fall into this category seem to agree with this assessment.

For some respondents, perceived instructor bias against religion or religious perspectives was to blame for the negative response Christian students might pick up on in the classroom. These students did not seem to feel personally attacked or marginalized by instructors, but they did note instructors’ tendency to dismiss or disregard Christian perspectives. While one student writes, “I think to take that stance [Christian] as an issue of identity is looked down on by UM faculty in general,” most are more specific about their observations of bias against Christian perspectives. In the following responses, for example, two students articulate how they experienced and interpreted instructor attitudes toward Christianity:

Both my professors had strong opinions about Christianity—it was very evident that they disdain certain [things] about [it].⁶⁵

Generally I have felt comfortable with my writing instructors as a Christian student. I think sometimes they get annoyed w/Christian students who express opinions w/a specifically Christian viewpoint.

These responses create a different picture of the classroom than do the responses related to Christians’ personal characteristics. At issue here are the instructors’ feelings about Christianity as a religion/ideology, not their views of Christian students’ intellectual capacities or knowledge levels. Therefore, a student who has “felt comfortable” with their writing instructors can also observe those instructors getting “annoyed” with

⁶⁵ The last few words of this sentence were difficult to read. “Things” and “it” are my best guesses based on legible letters and on the context.

students' Christian viewpoints. Likewise, a student can note their instructor's "disdain" for certain aspects of Christianity without necessarily feeling personally affronted.

The third response complicates the scenario, because here the student explains how they were affected by the instructors' attitudes toward Christianity. Far from feeling "comfortable," this student has felt "scared to share [their] views" because they observed how similar views were treated. In this case, the ways in which the instructor(s) communicated their feelings about Christian perspectives led to student silence. This student's response highlights the fact that there are a range of ways that an instructor's biases or predispositions—or even just student assumptions about these biases and predispositions—can affect students' choices in the classroom. As one survey respondent writes, "Any time you're voicing what you believe, especially religious wise, I feel professors and instructors will have their own biases."

Another student appears to have developed a strategy for avoiding negative instructor feedback on their religious beliefs. They write:

I would only expect a negative response if I posed some sort of moral orientation to Christianity. People can argue about the truth we derive from our experience, but they can't argue with how we experienced it, which opens discussion to what is logical to assume from our experience.

This student appears to make a distinction between discussing one's personal religious experiences and taking a moral stand grounded in Christian faith. This is, perhaps, reminiscent of instructor respondents' feelings that religious ideas were better suited to "personal essays" than to analytical/argumentative ones.

Two students speculate that instructor bias against Christianity stems from the instructor's personal experience with Christians or Christianity. Holly, for example, recalls an instructor who often made fun of Christians, particularly those who challenged some of what he taught. She says, "I think it's a shame, because I know that probably a lot of these Christians were really abrasive to him, but they also, you know . . . it's definitely a two-sided problem." Though she still sees the instructor's actions as part of the problem, Holly does not let Christians off the hook here; their "abrasive" behavior has contributed to the instructor's hostility. It has also apparently contributed to the

instructor's generalizations of Christian students, which Holly critiques as inaccurate and limiting.

Like Holly, Jamie argues that the ways in which instructors view Christian students are influenced by an instructor's predisposition towards Christianity. She says, "I guess it kind of depends on how the writing instructor feels about Christianity and stuff." Jamie points here to a purely emotional response—the ways that an instructor *feels* about Christianity will shape their perception of Christian students. In one way, this construct removes personal dislike from the equation (or at least distances it), but in another way it leaves individual Christian students to be judged based on instructors' gut reactions to a broad and multifaceted belief system. Jamie does not present instructor bias as malicious, but the implications of the perspective that Jamie offers are disturbing—imagine if instructors thought about various student groups based primarily on their feelings about each group's religious beliefs, history, ethnic background, political ideologies, and so forth, and then allowed those feelings to determine their interactions with individual students from those groups.

Isabelle hypothesizes that instructors' negative response to Christian students is based not so much on instructors' personal experiences with or feelings about Christianity, but on the fact that instructors may see Christian students as too rigidly set in their worldview. She says:

maybe another thing that professors may think is that once you have these beliefs that you really believe, you're already almost molded, whereas you're molded into- it almost makes you who you are . . . Maybe, almost- you're stuck or you're not as- you can't think as creatively because you're already- you've got a lot of energy in one place.

Isabelle is, in fact, picking up on one of instructors' concerns about students with strong religious faith—that they are unable or unwilling to consider other perspectives or ideas. In Isabelle's words, they may appear to be "stuck" or unable to "think as creatively." She is not, of course, claiming that this is actually the case; it is merely her speculation about what professors *may* think. The use (twice) of the word "molded" is worth noting here, as it calls to mind the notion of education as a process by which students are shaped in particular ways by the instructor. The problem cited here, however, is that Christian

students are “already almost molded,” thereby proving resistant to the influences of the course or the instructor.

The responses that fell into this category construct an image of writing instructors not as people who look down upon Christian students, but as people who are biased against religious perspectives or ideas. Though the personal affront is somewhat removed here, students are still assuming that a key part of their identity is not or will not be accepted by their writing instructors. For example, the student who notes that religious perspectives were not considered “intelligent or valid” in the writing classroom is left to choose between validation and expressing their religious views. For such students, instructors’ (assumed) perceptions directly influence the choices they make in the composition course.

Faith as Inappropriate for Academic Work

The remaining group of student survey respondents answered in one of three ways: that they didn’t know how instructors felt about Christian students, that the ways instructors reacted to Christian students varied from instructor to instructor and could sometimes be positive, or that instructors were wary about the use of religious perspectives in the classroom. The first two kinds of response were straightforward (typical responses were “I don’t know,” “it varies,” and “it depends on the instructor”), so I focus here primarily on the third category, which brought with it longer, more complex responses.

Four student survey responses articulate what they interpret as an imposed—and artificial—dichotomy between faith and intellect. One surveyed student writes, “I think [instructors] expect a dichotomy between religion and academics in students. They expect students to agree with them in most cases, because they believe their view is the logical one.” This student is pointing to a particular belief system that they see at work at the university: a system that keeps religion and academics separate. The student adds that adherents to this belief system feel strongly that “their view is the logical one,” and by doing so they are offering a critique of instructors that is similar to one sometimes aimed at Christian students—that they think their belief system is better than others, and

that it would be best if everyone agreed with them. Another surveyed student writes that at “UM I have felt scared to share my views. Through observation, views of Christians or from a Christian view didn’t receive weight, weren’t considered intelligent or valid.”

Not all students viewed instructor expectations as coming from instructors’ rigid confidence in their own ways of knowing. One student writes, “I think they [instructors] think of it as another aspect of life and as long as you look at it academically, just as you would sex, emotions, war, etc. then it’s okay.” Religious faith itself is not under attack in this case, and neither are adherents to religious faith. In the context of the classroom, however, it seems that faith is expected to be handled and discussed in a particular, academic way. Religion becomes a subject of academic study and examination, rather than a source of personal expression or ideology—what matters is “looking at it academically,” not whether or not one believes it to be true.

Several other students echo the notion that instructors encourage stronger academic work through the separation of personal faith and the writing classroom:

While most [instructors] are neutral towards students, they don’t encourage it [faith] reflecting in the writing.

They feel that beliefs are not a “factual” basis or valid support for an argument—as for the Christian identity they don’t care.

They are a little bit intolerable [*sic*] because they say that Christian-based papers tend to be one sided.

They don’t treat Christian students differently but it depends. Non-Christian writing instructors tend to think that a Christian POV would be biased.

David Claerbaut argues that faith is widely viewed as anti-intellectual (29), and it seems that these students have picked up on that notion as they’ve moved through their college writing courses. The first response listed does not provide a reason for the instructors’ not encouraging the incorporation of faith into academic writing, but the following three do: one states that instructors see beliefs as “not a ‘factual’ basis or valid support for an argument” and the others claim that instructors see faith-based papers as “biased” or “one-sided.” Instructors apparently “don’t care” whether or not students count being Christian as part of their identity; they just don’t want that identity to take center stage in students’ academic work.

Two students took this line of thinking one step further, arguing that instructors want religious beliefs left out of the classroom *completely*. One claims that instructors think that Christian students “should leave their beliefs out of academia” and the other writes, “I think writing instructors generally expect students to maintain a separation between religious beliefs and academic work.” From this perspective, instructors avoid questions of bias and fact, because religious belief itself becomes inappropriate for academic writing.

Recent scholarship in religion and higher education supports this view of expected separation. A number of scholars note religion’s shifting role in academe over the past fifty years; what was once woven into almost every area of study has been corralled (generally into Religious Studies) and become an object of study itself (Claerbaut 29; Edwards 1; Fish C1; Marsden 36). Though Mark Edwards claims that religious convictions can relatively easily be brought back into humanities scholarship or teaching because of disciplinary awareness of how our ways of knowing influence what we do (135), student responses depict this integration of faith and academic work as a much more complicated proposition from the students’ side of the equation.

For one thing, Christian students may be concerned that disclosure of religious identity will mean being judged personally and then having to overcome preconceived notions of Christians or Christianity. They may also worry about prejudice against religious perspectives more broadly, and deem it safer or more practical to leave those perspectives outside of the classroom. Finally, students may have (or may assume that they have) instructors who expect a strict dichotomy between religious discourses and academic work.

All of these factors may contribute to students’ caution in bringing religious discourse into academic contexts. As students struggle to understand what is expected of them and of their writing in the composition course, they are also struggling to navigate the ways (they assume that) instructors think about them and about their religious beliefs. Instructor perceptions of Christian students—whether or not they are “real”—help determine how these students engage with instructors and with academic writing.

Writing Classrooms as Sites of Possibility

Though there were four specific survey responses and two interviewed students—Theresa and Jamie—who cited writing courses as contexts in which they either felt they had to or were told to limit their religious expression, two other interviewed students saw the English writing classroom as a place in which religious expression was *better* tolerated than elsewhere on campus. These students present the composition course as a fruitful context for the integration of personal beliefs and academic work, and their responses are optimistic about the potential for Christian students to be intellectually engaged in ways that both respect their faith and further the academic goals of the classroom.

Holly, for example, says that “it seems like people in the liberal arts are a little more respectful of people’s personal beliefs.” She is speaking in contrast to what she’s observed in science classes, where she has witnessed Christians/Christianity mocked by instructors and students.⁶⁶ Rebecca, speaking as an art major, thinks that “[i]n the English department, it [Christianity] is a little more accepted, maybe.” When prompted to elaborate, she adds, “just because things are so open, people share so much in their writing that it’s . . . they just almost expect it.” Though expectation is quite different from tolerance or acceptance, Rebecca does seem to have had a positive experience with incorporating her faith into her writing, and feels that she got to have “a different relationship with [the instructor] than other students may have” by virtue of writing about her faith and then discussing it with the instructor.

Like Rebecca, several survey students recall writing instructors who were open to different beliefs and who made students feel safe to express those beliefs. Two students note that they felt that writing instructors were “open to any opinions.” Another writes

⁶⁶ What is curious about Holly’s statement is that it is followed shortly thereafter by a description of a writing assignment that appears to run counter to her claim. She says, “we had to take a stand on controversial issues, and I didn’t really feel like the professor wanted to hear what I had to say on some controversial issues, so I picked one, but I had a view that I figured would be kind of in line with hers.” It is not clear whether Holly sees this particular instructor as an exception to the general “a little more respectful of people’s personal beliefs” rule, if a “little more respectful” really means only a *little* more respectful, or if she simply thought it too risky to bank on an instructor’s tolerance of views that ran counter to her own. In any case, she provides this example without amending or qualifying her initial statement.

that they did draw from their faith in their writing, because they “did not feel that this would be seen negatively by the instructor.”

Still another student, in a slightly more complicated response, writes, “She was open & supportive of me. There was one incident where I felt marginalized by her as I overheard a comment she made regarding me to another student.” The first and second sentences clash rather dramatically—an “open and supportive” instructor meets an instructor who makes a student feel “marginalized” by talking about them to a classmate. Interestingly enough, the two sentences are not linked in any way, apart from appearing in sequence. There is no explanation of how these two experiences work together, and no additional context is provided. We are left to take at face value that the instructor was “open and supportive,” and to surmise that the marginalizing incident was an exception to an otherwise positive relationship between student and instructor.

Isabelle presents writing classrooms as places in which both students and instructors could engage in the exploration and critique of worldviews (both religious and nonreligious), though she does not necessarily see that work being done at this point. Isabelle, when asked how she thought instructors would react to receiving a paper written from a Christian perspective, says, “I think there’s a separation or maybe just in general there’s a separation between intellect and faith. Or maybe that you’re more kind of out there. Faith is something you can’t see...” When asked the follow-up question, “So they would see you as not as intellectual?” Isabelle’s answer is “Yeah, maybe.” Despite her perception of instructors’ opinion on the faith/intellect divide, she answers a definitive “no” when asked if she thinks that there is a distinct separation between faith and intellectualism, and describes how she sees the two working together:

No. I think to - no, I don't think so, because I think when you're really questioning the things about 'does God exist' or, you know, you really have to put more thought into that than you do into even, you know, any kind of school you can do, because it's something there's no actual like, 'I can see that' . . . So you really have to think it through.

For Isabelle, questions of faith are deeply intellectual, in part because of how abstract and challenging some of the concepts and questions of faith can be. Some scholars would agree with her, arguing that religious convictions can actually be a productive part of academic engagement and development (Bernstein 154; Diamond 203; Edwards 72, 91;

Grinnell B5; Kuh and Gonyea 44; Noll 163; Thomas and Bahr 24). Far from being a separate entity from her academic work, Isabelle's faith appears to be an integral part of her intellectual development.

This may be why she wishes that writing instructors were more engaged with questions of worldview, and were more open to direct conversations about how belief systems enter and affect the classroom. She sees the writing classroom as a context in which students and instructors can acknowledge and think through the implications of beliefs for writing. When asked how she would change how writing instructors approached their classes, Isabelle pauses for a few seconds and then replies:

maybe, you know, you know how we had talked about audience who are in this... well, also [having instructors] being aware of more of a worldview than where they're coming from . . . But also maybe even making an announcement, like in the beginning of class, like, 'You know what, I realize everyone's coming from somewhere different, and I don't care what your view is, you can write on what your view is, and I'm not gonna grade you on that. But I want you to realize who I am as well, and write to me, you know, even if you think that, you know. And I'm not gonna grade you based on what you believe, but I will grade you on how do you...' And I think that would help people learn a lot too.

Isabelle is envisioning a composition course not just in which all views are tolerated, but in which all views are made visible—students' *and* instructors'—and put on equal footing. She is asking for instructors not to evaluate students' worldviews, but to make a place for them in the classroom. This is perhaps to ask for the impossible, as it implies a strict separation of form and content and supposes that instructors can resist evaluating students' worldviews. It also appears to assume that all worldviews are equally valid and equally appropriate for the writing classroom, an assumption that would give many instructors (and students) pause. It is easy to see the appeal of such a classroom, however: there is no façade of neutrality, but every person's voice still has an equal place in the conversation; the instructor makes their own positions clear and acknowledges how they shape them as an audience for the paper, but respects students' perspectives so much that they will not allow their own biases to influence their evaluation of student work.

Isabelle takes her recommendations one step further to suggest that instructors give assignments that ask students to step purposefully outside of their own worldview:

It'd be cool in classrooms, if people had to be honest about what their worldview was and then have to write a paper from a worldview that was not your own. That'd be hard, that'd be interesting. Like if something's really important to you, you know, your religion or something, writing from a different standpoint . . . That would be cool. I mean - and almost as though you're in somebody else's shoes . . . And maybe the professor could write one too and read it to the class.

It is no small task that Isabelle is setting forth here. It is one thing to write a paper in which one defends a position that one does not actually hold or believe in; it is quite another to attempt to write a paper from outside one's whole perspective on the world—and some would even argue that the latter is an impossibility. Still, Isabelle raises an interesting point in terms of how worldview is dealt with in the classroom, and its potential to challenge both instructors and students to understand others' perspectives more deeply.

For other students, who see instructors' and students' beliefs already powerfully (though not always productively) at work in the classroom, Isabelle's idea may make sense. Rebecca claims that some instructors already “teach what they believe,” but it's not in the direct, upfront manner Isabelle envisions. She says that instructors will “just bring in random things about how there's no God” without appearing to make any connection between such statements and the subject matter. She recalls a class in which the issue of belief was raised, but in an uncomfortable way that shut down discussion.

In another class, however, Rebecca had quite a different experience with sharing her beliefs. In her first-year writing course, her professor “just told [students] that [they] could write about anything we wanted to,” so Rebecca chose to write about her conversion to and belief in Christianity. The paper was workshopped in a small group, and Rebecca was paired with a Muslim student and a student who “wrote the complete opposite” of her paper. She recalls this experience fondly:

[I]t was really cool, because it opened up some really awesome conversation, and I could tell that when they read my paper that they wanted to- that they wanted to kind of get aggressive . . . But I feel like we all came to a certain understanding that we need to be respectful of each other, so we all, I don't know, we communicated well, it was good.

In spite of a situation with the potential to be very uncomfortable—even hostile—Rebecca and her peers seem to have had a productive and engaging dialogue about their

divergent worldviews. Rebecca was also pleased with her instructor's response to this essay, despite the fact that her instructor "doesn't believe the same things" that she does. She remembers that her instructor:

wrote one huge paragraph at the end . . . about how she thinks that it's great that I'm searching and stuff, and to not stop searching, and to never be settled with what I believe. And, I don't know, she really- I was fine with that, I thought it was really cool how she had a conversation with me like that . . . she was pretty bold with what she said.

Rebecca relished this exchange (which led to additional conversations) as "an opportunity to get to know [the instructor] better." The instructor's "bold" comments about Rebecca's beliefs were taken as genuine, constructive feedback. It would not be surprising for a student to take offense at such comments—particularly ones that admonish them "to never be settled with what [they] believe," and it's possible that Rebecca had some hesitation about how to respond. Immediately after sharing that comment, she stammers a bit, moving from, "I don't know, she really" to "I was fine with that." This sentence may reveal some mild feelings of conflict about the instructor's remarks, or perhaps of Rebecca's awareness that others could construe the remarks as over the line or offensive. Overall, though, it appears that for Rebecca, an open conversation—sparked by her writing—about religious beliefs with her instructor and her peers became an engaging, productive way of learning to articulate her ideas and interact with those holding different, sometimes conflicting, ones. Rebecca's experience may be unusual, but it demonstrates the possibility of Christian students being given freedom to incorporate religious discourses into their academic work even as they are challenged to interrogate their beliefs.

While a couple of the experiences recounted above could give reason for pause in determining how welcoming writing classrooms and instructors actually are to Christian discourses, it is important to consider that the students themselves interpreted these classroom interactions as positive and respectful, especially in contrast to their experiences in other academic contexts. These narratives reveal great potential for religiously committed students to be academically challenged without being told to leave their beliefs outside the classroom door.

Implications

This chapter identifies patterns across student responses and puts student voices in conversation with each other to create an image—though it is a partial, complex, and multidimensional image—of what it means to be a Christian, and what it means to be a Christian writing student, at the University of the Midwest. Recognizing and taking seriously students’ perceptions of their place on campus and of how their writing instructors think about them is key in defining what Albertini calls “attitudinal barriers in the classroom” that are created in part by students’ experiences and views (395).

The challenges brought into the classroom by students’ religious beliefs are heightened by uncertainty surrounding the appropriate role of religious discourses in a public university setting. The messiness of belief, along with the attendant fear of discussing and disclosing beliefs, factors into the ways in which Christian students and their instructors relate to one another. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese claims that “the prevailing secular mindset [makes] the idea of conversion virtually incomprehensible. For secular academics, the language and practice of faith belong to an alien world” (39). For some students, the alien world is one in which faith is *not* a primary source of reason.

It is this “alien world” that students have described in this chapter. They struggle to find their place in a university setting that at times feels threatening to them, both socially and academically. Like other groups who face stereotyping and who expect certain kinds of discrimination, Christian students must choose how to negotiate their identities within a campus community that may not seem accepting of identity grounded in religious belief.

In the writing classroom in particular, students sometimes practice risk-averse behaviors to avoid uncomfortable interactions with peers and instructors. Many assume that to identify as Christian is to invite doubts or preconceived notions about their intellectual abilities, their political views, and their openness to people of other faiths and worldviews. Though these assumptions may not always be accurate, they are in some cases grounded in the lived experience of these Christian students at UM.

Equally significant are the experiences of Christian students who have had their religious beliefs productively engaged in the writing classroom. These students do not see religious discourses as existing outside of their academic work, and appear to have had instructors who have challenged the binary of faith and intellectualism. Though students recalling this kind of work are a minority in this study, their experiences complicate depictions of UM as a somewhat unwelcoming environment for Christian students and provide a hopeful image of writing courses as places can that engage and challenge students' religious beliefs.

Chapter Five

“WE WERE SPEAKING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES”: INSTRUCTORS’ ENCOUNTERS WITH STUDENTS’ RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

The previous two chapters have addressed instructors’ perceptions of Christian students and Christian students’ perceptions of their writing instructors and of themselves as students and writers. With those perceptions as a backdrop, this chapter and the next take a closer look at the writing classroom itself, drawing attention to the challenges students and instructors face in the classroom, on the kinds of work students are expected to do there, and on what the perceived purpose of that work is.

This chapter focuses on instructors’ experiences with Christian students and their writing. As instructors described these experiences in interviews and on surveys, and as they wrestled with the impact of religious discourses on writing and on their pedagogy, they revealed their perspectives on what the work of a composition course is meant to be and is meant to do. Though instructors did not necessarily recognize it, the controversial nature of some religious discourses pushed them toward articulations of what students are “supposed to do” in their writing courses, because religious discourses sometimes resist what may strike instructors as commonsensical or assumed.

Although they did not do so purposefully or explicitly, instructors were forming definitions of the work of composition as they describe their reactions to student work or discourses that struck them as foreign to or inappropriate for the writing course. These definitions are significant, because they reveal the expectations and assumptions that instructors reported holding as they teach, and because—as will be clear in the following chapter—they did not always match neatly with students’ own ideas about their work. As Edward Schiappa argues, definitions are by nature selective and political; they “affirm or deny specific interests and encourage particular linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviors”

(68). Instructors' definitions, then, are a powerful force in determining what is valued in composition courses.

Instructors' definitions of the work of composition also connect to a long-established and ongoing conversation in the field of composition studies about what the purposes of composition courses are. Sometimes explicitly and sometimes indirectly, composition scholars have offered definitions of what writing courses do or should do, as well as the kinds of work students should be asked to do in these courses. I put my analysis of instructor data in conversation with this scholarship throughout this chapter in order to get a fuller view of how those who teach composition define the work of the writing classroom, specifically in relation/reaction to students' use of religious discourses.

The first part of this chapter looks at instructor anxiety and frustration around religious discourses for what these responses reveal about instructors' expectations for student work and instructors' course goals. The second part of the chapter deals more specifically with the ways in which Christian students seem to violate the academic norms that instructors expect them to follow, and how these violations cause instructors to think about the presence of religious discourses in the classroom. In both of these sections, I seek to "pull out" definitions of the work of composition from the language that instructors use to explain student work and their reactions to it. Lastly, the chapter addresses the choice between avoidance and engagement that instructors face when they encounter a student's Christian discourse.

Instructor Anxiety & Frustration

As noted in the discussion of instructor perceptions in Chapter 3, instructors often experience a great deal of frustration in dealing with Christian students' discourses, and this frustration is potentially a significant factor in determining how an instructor chooses to allow or not allow religious discussion or discourses into their courses. Instructors' anxieties around Christian discourses make clear some of the expectations that instructors have for their writing courses, and some of the ways that they design their courses and assignments. When instructors feel anxiety and frustration, it is often because their

students are not meeting their expectations about what work in a composition course entails.

What Belongs in the Classroom

In discussing their study on student spirituality and its connection to academic engagement, George Kuh and Robert Gonyea caution that the presence of openly religious students:

will, if it hasn't already, present challenges to faculty members, administrators, and governing boards who have not determined how to strike the appropriate balance between the spiritual or religious practices and student learning, or whether these human development goals can or even should be addressed within the curriculum (40).

Instructors are, indeed, presented with this challenge, and it pushes them to articulate what “can and should be addressed” in their classrooms. The vast majority of instructors surveyed and interviewed for this study appear not to have developed a strategy for “striking the appropriate balance between the spiritual or religious practices and student learning”; in fact, many are just beginning to think through the implications of religious discourses for their pedagogy. Faith and religion have “experienced a resurgence of interest in society at large as well as in academia” following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Diamond and Copre xix), and writing instructors at the University of the Midwest—along with numerous instructors and scholars across all disciplines—are facing the challenge of addressing this interest in meaningful, pedagogically sound ways. Instructors are left to make sense of how religious discourses do or do not fit with their pedagogical goals, and how they shape or disrupt the kinds of work that they want students to do.

Contributing to the difficulty of such tasks may be a level of discomfort with religion or religious discourses in general. According to a HERI (2006) study on faculty spirituality, “most [faculty] are uncomfortable addressing religious/spiritual issues in class and anticipate that students may feel this way, as well” (Trautvetter 33). Rhonda Leathers Dively asserts that “within the microcosm of the secular university, it has become intellectually suspect to subscribe to the ‘Great’ religions” and those who do are

marginalized (91-2). Addressing religion in class therefore carries certain risks. One UM instructor, Paige, explains that she is hesitant to embark on discussions of religion in her classroom because:

There's an interesting power dynamic and the question is here you have this teacher who clearly identifies as liberal—'cause I say I haven't read the Bible, and who can't quote Scripture, end up feeling like maybe- either they have moral superiority . . . And then I'm mad because I don't feel like they do but maybe they do, and so I think that can create an interesting power dynamic as the ignorant non-religious instructor.

At risk here is Paige's authority. Certain religious discourses, she seems to feel, threaten her position as a knowledgeable teacher worthy of students' respect because she is unable to communicate using those discourses and effectively engage with those who are. Her inability to "quote Scripture" and her outsider position as one who hasn't read the Bible potentially marks her as an "*ignorant* non-religious instructor" (emphasis mine), one who is possibly morally inferior to her students—not merely a nonreligious instructor. This positioning makes Paige "mad." Paige's anger conveys an assumption that the composition classroom is not a place to assert one's supposed moral superiority—that this is not the purpose of class discussion, and that it positions the instructor (and potentially others) in ways not in keeping with Paige's vision for her classroom. Though Paige describes the power dynamic created by religious discourses merely as "interesting," the rest of her statement indicates that this is not a desirable or comfortable dynamic for her.

Even for instructors who do have experience as participating members of a religious community, engaging with religious discourses in the classroom may feel like a risky undertaking. Peggy Catron, a self-described former fundamentalist Christian,⁶⁷ speculates that conversations about religion may strike faculty as dissonant with traditional academic forms of inquiry and discussion. She writes:

Perhaps for some of us, reluctance to allow discussions of religion and faith in the classroom springs from our own deep ambivalence about the issues . . . In matters of faith, there is no right answer, no objective proof, and for academics who swim in the water of objectivity and rationalism, discussions

⁶⁷ Catron notes that her faith is still central to her life, though it "looks very different now from the way it did when [she] began teaching" (65).

concerning these matters may throw us off balance and make us unsure of our footing (75).

It is perhaps for this reason—that religious discourses often resist objective proof and strict rationalism—that surveyed instructors come to conclusions such as “in the context of a course at a public university, religious beliefs ought to generally be eschewed” and “religion is only acceptable as a belief system and that isn’t relevant to academic arguments” and that religious faith is appropriate for “personal narrative, reflection, etc. Not for analytic work.” There seems to be a sense that religious discourses bring with them ways of thinking that do not mesh with instructors’ notions of academic work. Though instructors here focus more on issues of appropriateness than risk, it is possible that their strict separation of religion from academic work also serves to protect them from being “unsure of their footing” in the face of religious discourses.

Though instructors frame their narratives in various ways, their stories about troubling encounters with student work and/or comments expose their expectations for a certain kind of reasoning and dialogue in the classroom—reasoning and dialogue that religious discourses seem to resist. We find a specific example in Paige’s experience teaching “gay texts” in her courses. She had a student voice resistance to one of the texts, claiming that she had no sympathy for the homosexual narrator, because he had “made a choice.” Paige found the student’s comment upsetting, but she chose to turn the statement over to the class to begin a conversation about how writers affect their audiences. Despite facilitating what she deemed a productive conversation, Paige still remembers the way she felt as she led the discussion:

And so, I said, ‘Well, I can imagine that this is a response that some readers may feel after reading this text,’ and so in that moment tried to- and my heart was beating, I was sweating, and it raises an issue of me actually wanting to cry because I can’t believe that someone would say that, that it was a choice.

Paige wasn’t merely upset because a student challenged a text or disliked a narrator. This clearly was not a matter of objectivity or rationality, either. Paige had a strong, visceral reaction to the specific content of this student’s statement. It was a statement that she read as intolerant, a statement that left her “wanting to cry.” Paige’s expectations for class discussion and for student interactions with texts that challenged their beliefs were

obviously not met in this case. Later in her interview, she acknowledges that certain forms of intolerance bother her more than others and expresses concern about her own potential intolerance of Christian students; these reflections tell us something about the way that Paige looks at the writing course. Beyond a focus on writing, there is clearly an assumption that the composition course is a place where those who have been traditionally marginalized will have a voice (as Paige makes clear in her discussion of selecting “gay texts” and of her desire for her gay students to feel safe and free to speak).

The focus on giving voice to historically marginalized groups—and the implication that historically dominant groups may need to be challenged or even, occasionally, silenced—is not unique to Paige. Composition studies scholarship—particularly scholarship dealing with notions of critical pedagogy or multicultural education—echoes Paige’s expectations for the negotiation of power and marginalization in the writing course (V. Anderson 446; Brodkey 243; Freire 86; Harkin 280; Sleeter 124). That her student’s comment about a homosexual narrator has become such a vivid pedagogical memory for Paige is not surprising; the comment violated her expectations for a safe, academic discussion about a text.⁶⁸

A similar example comes from Juanita Smart. In her recollection of a student essay that “sound[ed] an alarm” for her, Smart writes:

The student’s rhetoric invokes the church language I associate with the anti-gay curses of my youth, distancing me and threatening to cloud my evaluation of the essay. Complicating that dilemma is an insistent summons that I want to ignore—one that goads me to once again revisit and reconcile my own professions of faith with the emerging professions of my sexuality (11).

Like Paige, Smart is disturbed by student discourse that feels threatening (and distancing) to her as an instructor. Smart expresses disappointment in the student’s “dualistic thinking . . . and explicit disregard for the complexities and ambiguities that constitute faith,” but she also reflects on the “problematic” nature of her own “resistance to the rhetoric of his faith” (13-4, 15). Part of Smart’s description of an effective composition

⁶⁸ Instructors raise the issue of safety several times in relation to students (and instructors) feeling respected, free from judgment, and able to speak without fear of harsh or negative response from others. The issue of safety becomes complicated, however, in light of instructors’ emphasis on challenging students to think critically about difficult questions—action that may require pushing students out of their comfort zones and into territory that they may experience as risky or “unsafe.”

course seems to be one in which the instructor can address problematic student discourse without allowing their personal biases to “cloud” fair evaluation of writing or respect for the student.

As is evident in both Paige’s and Smart’s narratives, faculty risk a certain amount of vulnerability when they engage with religious discourses in the classroom. For Smart and Paige, religious discourses entered the classroom through students’ thoughts on homosexuality, demonstrating how the discussion of certain topics (or in Paige’s case, a text that engaged with the topic in some way) may lead to an encounter with religious discourses that the instructor did not anticipate or desire.

Another area in which instructors encounter religious discourses is when the class embarks on discussions that invite reflection on “big questions.” Judy Rogers and Patrick Love, in discussing their study of how faculty and graduate students in college student personnel (CSP) programs think about spirituality and religion, note that interviews with faculty reveal “their recognition that if they push students to examine these issues of meaning and purpose, they (faculty) needed to share their struggles with these big questions, too. They had to be vulnerable in discussing these ultimate concerns with students” (56). The prospect of disclosure and vulnerability raises the stakes considerably for instructors who engage with religious discourses. As one instructor who completed the survey notes, “I also don’t know how to challenge some Christian students to be more critical thinkers without entering into religious conversations”—the implication being that “religious” conversations are so undesirable that they are not worth the risk, even in service to “critical thinking.”

There is a tension here around the instructor’s description of the kinds of work expected in a composition course: students are expected to learn to think critically (and the instructor is expected to teach them how), but “entering into religious conversations” is to be avoided. The tension arises, of course, when a lesson in critical thinking overlaps with or connects to religious conversation. Though the instructor does not explain why, they make clear that they do not see engagement with religion as part of their work as an instructor, and they appear to see it as a potential distraction from the primary goal of fostering critical thinking.

The anxiety that instructors feel about religious discourses in the classroom as exhibited in their surveys and interviews may stem from a desire for personal comfort (for example, the instructor above clearly does not feel comfortable discussing religion with students), but it also comes from a desire to ensure students' comfort. One instructor writes, "Since we workshop student papers as a whole class, I often worry how a student's very Christian argument will be received by his/her classmates." Instructors also worry about how disclosure of their own religious or non-religious views might affect students. According to Trautvetter, "Faculty want to connect with students, but often are concerned about including personal perspectives in the classroom and blurring boundaries with issues of faith—influencing students too much or silencing them" (43). The anxiety in this case is rooted in concern for how the reactions and perspectives of others might affect a religiously committed student. Revealed here is a sense that part of the work of the composition instructor is to protect students from discomfort in relation to their personal beliefs or identity.

Evaluation

An apparent cause of great anxiety and frustration for instructors is attempting to respond to and evaluate student writing that in some way clashes with their expectations. Instructors' conceptions of strong academic writing as that which engages in complexity, provides warrants for claims, considers multiple perspectives, and takes on challenges to the writer's ideas or beliefs are sometimes thwarted by students' apparent inability to understand what academic writing is for, or what it should do.

When they receive student essays that combine religious discourses with political or social opinions that strike them as offensive, instructors may be tempted to respond as harshly as Douglas Downs did to his student (discussed in Chapter 3) who used Biblical evidence to argue against adoption rights for gay couples. Downs, whose comments called the student's paper "indoctrinated, uncritical, and simplistically reasoned," acknowledges that this was just the beginning of "the harshest response I've ever written on a student's paper, one that made me sound like a jerk. I was frustrated, of course, in this case with a student engaging in dogma rather than inquiry" (39).

As Downs later notes, his response was so harsh not simply because the student had written a bad paper—after all, “other students’ poor arguments and weak logic did not provoke such an intolerant response”—but because the paper was grounded in a discourse that struck him as fundamentally opposed to the kinds of work expected in an academic context (40). Downs points to inquiry as the (or a) purpose of student writing, and it was undermined by the student’s devotion to dogma. That the student seemed unable to see this opposition fueled Downs’ frustration.

Some UM instructors appear to have had similar encounters with Christian students, in that their students made assumptions about argument and audience that surprised and in some cases frustrated instructors as they tried to respond. Here is how four of them describe their experiences:

For a paper on *Slaughterhouse Five*, the student thought of the character of Billy Pilgrim as a Christ-like figure. Throughout the paper, the writer assumed the audience was on the same theological page (i.e., just as Christ died for our sins, Pilgrim...).

I remember the student having a strong desire to write an argumentative essay on issues that were controversial within her church. The student was an Episcopalian and she felt strongly about writing an essay on the situation with the gay Episcopalian bishop. Her essay was not academically strong—it read like more of a letter to the editor, complete with name-calling. The student took an aggressive, unapologetic anti-gay clergy stance and she didn’t really complete the assignment, which asked students to consider both sides of the question. Her attempts to consider the opposing view were lame—she only considered the most extreme pro-gay clergy views (that I doubt anyone would really hold) to knock them down—she didn’t consider any realistic views of the issue from any perspective but her own.

I’ve also had students who refused to engage in academic dialogue about any issue because by giving the Bible the last word they eschewed academic debate. The work of the latter fails to produce the sort of complexity that one expects or requires of a college student. Then it is difficult to explain to the student that the grade reflects a lack of warrants for her claim rather than a bias against the claim itself, which is based in the dogma of the religion.

I wouldn’t describe any exchanges I have had as “conflicts.” But as I said above, many of my Christian students seem programmed to tune-out or ignore certain kinds of challenges to their faith.

These descriptions reveal a frustration similar to Downs’. They present Christian students whose writing seems to fly in the face of the kinds of work instructors are

expecting from their students. Instructors' specific criticisms demonstrate, through opposition, what instructors want to see in their students' writing. For example, the students noted above made assumptions about their audience's religious beliefs; didn't consider opposing viewpoints in any substantive way; used the Bible to close off academic debate; and seemed "programmed" to tune out challenges to their beliefs—all moves that counter their instructors' desires for their work.

Complicating matters is the fact that Christian students' discourses are sometimes personally offensive or very unfamiliar to instructors. This means that on top of the questionable rhetorical moves that these student writers make (for example, assuming that their readers are Christian), instructors are also working with student texts that cause them personal discomfort, as was evident in Juanita Smart's recollection of a student paper. Receiving a paper written from a religious point of view may present instructors with the challenge of responding to work with which they strongly disagree, or that dredges up negative personal experiences with a religious discourse or community.

Four UM instructors note their own immediate, negative responses to Christian discourses, and they acknowledge ways in which their associations with religion/religious discourses might affect their reading of student work. Though perhaps not as dramatically rendered as Smart's, the experiences of two of these instructors highlight the same kind of struggle against oneself that Smart engages in to avoid having personal experience "cloud [her] evaluation" of student writing:

I found it difficult to evaluate the writing, because I'm not a Christian and I was afraid I might be prejudiced against the student's writing.

I grew up in the South, and in the environment in which I grew up, my strongest association with religion in public spaces, writing, and conversation, is that of evangelism, conservatism, and often personal and emotional, versus intellectual, reflection. I hate to dichotomize them so much, but admittedly, that is often my association; so I believe for this reason among others, I have also never *invited* religion into student writing per se.

Both of the instructors quoted above acknowledge some personal obstacle to evaluating writing grounded in religious faith, and both specifically mention their anxiety or mixed feelings about the ways in which their personal orientation towards Christianity or religion might influence their reading of student work. Like Smart, these instructors

seem highly aware of the power they have to treat a student's religious discourse as a "kind of ill-formed, if not illegitimate monster" (14), and express a desire to minimize that outcome. These responses say something about what these instructors think the role of the composition instructor is or should be: the instructor should not be prejudiced against student work, and the instructor should resist easy dichotomies that stereotype and simplify student belief.

Though the second instructor critiques their own ways of thinking about religion, the remedy for this difficulty appears to be maintaining a safe distance from religious discourses. The instructor gives no indication that they ban religious discourses from their course, but they also "have never *invited* religion into student writing per se." Religious discourses do not appear to belong here, not because they *are* divorced from intellectualism or reflective thinking, but because they so easily *call to mind* ways of thinking or communicating that are not intellectual or reflective. The instructor notes that this is only one reason "among others" for not inviting religious discourses into the course, though there is no indication of what these other reasons may be.

It is clear from the first instructor quoted above that one additional reason for the instructor's discomfort with the presence of religious discourses in the classroom is worry about how fairly or objectively they will be able to evaluate Christian students' work, and how students will respond to their comments. The instructor notes only that they are "not a Christian," but this seems enough to cause concern that they will be prejudiced against the student's writing (an interesting proposition, especially if one replaces the word *Christian* with some other descriptor, such as *an immigrant*, *an Asian American*, *a woman*, etc.). There are many subject positions that instructors won't share with certain students, yet this particular point of departure feels significant enough to this instructor to warrant fear about prejudice.

This fear is understandable, given that the "Christian" marker signifies a certain attendant belief system, and not merely biological traits or national identity. The belief system complicates evaluation, as another surveyed instructor discovered. They write of a student essay:

[I]t was a persuasive essay (on abortion), and I found it challenging to objectively grade something I disagreed with.

This instructor is also concerned about their own reactions and responsibilities to student work, as evidenced by their attempt to “objectively grade” this essay. Though the instructor does not mention religious discourse specifically, the above statement came in response to a survey question about whether they had ever had a Christian student incorporate their religious beliefs into academic writing, and what the result of that incorporation was. It could be that the presence of religious beliefs raised the stakes for the instructor here, as a negative, “subjective” response to the content of the essay might seem to the student a comment on the validity of their beliefs. After all, when instructors evaluate student work, they are making concrete decisions about what counts and what does not, what has a place in academic writing and what should be left out of it.

Bronwyn Williams comments on the seriousness of this concern for instructors as they respond to student work that incorporates religious discourses. He states that a pedagogical emphasis on tolerance and multiculturalism:

leads some teachers to fear commenting on students’ religious statements or writing lest their comments be considered intolerant . . . Such a perceived failure of tolerance toward others becomes a perceived moral failing, not just a professional one. These anxieties, when combined with the implicit values of a secular, individualist civil society, can place the teacher at the center of an uncomfortable conflict (“Book” 108).

There is no easy solution to this conflict. Williams argues that trying to understand “the meaning of faith to an individual and his relationship to the unspeakable, undefinable, and unprovable” is “frustrating and ripe for misunderstandings” (107) and without mutual understanding, it is difficult to see how an instructor and student could productively address the problems raised by religious discourses. Adrienne recalls trying to talk to a Christian student about one of his papers in which his faith figured prominently. It was a difficult and frustrating conversation, and Adrienne “felt, at the time, that because [her] background and his background were so different, [she and the student] were speaking a different language.” Talking with a student about their work can be challenging enough without such “language” barriers.

The following section looks more deeply into some of the sources of instructor frustration with student writing that incorporates Christian discourses. It is important to

keep in mind that aspects of this discussion will overlap with larger discussions about student writing (and about teaching writing); in other words, some of the problems described could be applied to other student groups, or to first-year college students in general. Gina, for example, notes that the rhetorical moves that Christian students make are not necessarily much different from those of their peers. She says:

[For example] students write about abortion from Christian perspectives, and—so it seems like automatically sort of has some foregone conclusions to the questions they’re asking, right, because they’ve said, “I’m a Christian.” But I will also say that I’m not sure that there’s anything very intellectually dishonest about that. I think there are a lot of, a lot of people- a lot of 18, 20-year-olds enter a given situation with a set of opinions.

When instructors discuss the work of Christian students, then, they are often picking up on more widespread challenges to teaching new college students. Christian students, however, appear to challenge the norms of composition courses in conspicuous ways. The fact that their resistance is made known through religious discourses leaves some instructors struggling to articulate what belongs in the writing course, and to balance pedagogically appropriate responses to Christian students with what are sometimes very personal reactions to the discourses these students bring to their work.

Perceived Violations of Academic Norms

One of the most significant patterns found in the instructor survey and interview data is a concern about Christian students’ ability and/or willingness to adhere to the academic norms expected from writing students at a public university. Instructors seem to be looking for students to do work that exhibits particular kinds of rhetorical and thinking skills, and Christian students often seem not to understand or not to be inclined to do this kind of work. In “Blinking in the Sunlight: Exploring the Fundamentalist Perspective,” Peggy Catron writes:

I often hear stories from faculty about “confrontations” with zealous fundamentalist students who refuse to read or consider certain texts they see as offensive or anti-Christian or who express intolerance for other viewpoints or lifestyles (including gay/lesbian). Often these encounters are chalked up to a

lack of critical thinking skills, close-mindedness, irrational thinking, or hostility toward objective investigation (65).

The problems that the faculty described by Catron seem to have with Christian students align closely with the problems described by instructors in this study. Similarly, the ways in which these problems are “chalked up to” a lack of critical thinking skills or resistance to academic norms regarding tolerance, open-mindedness, and investigation resonate with the ways in which instructors at UM portray the possible causes of Christian students’ failure to meet their expectations.

In this section, I present the academic norms that drew the most attention from instructors as they talked and wrote about Christian students.⁶⁹ I then discuss some of the ways in which the (actual or perceived) violation of those norms affects the instructor-student relationship. As in the previous section, this discussion also points to the ways in which instructors’ definitions and descriptions of the work of a composition course are revealed in their accounts of Christian students’ writing.

As previously noted, frustration with Christian students was a common emotion cited by instructors, and identifying the key sources of that frustration became an important part of analyzing the data. When an instructor expressed frustration, implicitly or explicitly, I looked to the context of that expression for its specific trigger(s)—often a student essay or comment, a moment of tension between student and instructor, or uncertainty about pedagogical strategy. Analysis of instructor surveys and interviews, put in conversation with recent composition scholarship, leads me to believe that one primary source of instructor frustration with Christian students is the aforementioned failure of these students to abide by anticipated academic norms in their work for these instructors’ courses.

Though instructors offered many different kinds of examples of how Christian students did not meet their expectations, most could be connected to one of the following

⁶⁹ An important caveat: these academic norms were not always named or discussed explicitly by instructors, so I often relied upon interpretation as I decided which data fit under each norm category. I am, however, reasonably confident in my interpretations, as I was able to ask follow-up and clarifying questions during interviews, and because both surveyed and interviewed instructors frequently used examples to expand upon and explain what they meant when discussing student work.

academic norms: critical thinking, audience awareness, appropriate use of evidence, and tolerance. Below I have addressed each norm individually.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking was an academic norm that 24% of instructor participants claimed Christian students sometimes failed to live up to, although three instructors also noted that this was a difficulty that they ran into with many different kinds of students.⁷⁰ Critical thinking became an issue with Christian students in particular when they addressed religious faith or controversial social/political issues in their writing in ways that the instructor felt were not intellectually sound. Though instructors did tend to see Christian students as well prepared in terms of general academic ability—students were described as *motivated, respectful of the learning process, hard-working, diligent, and articulate*—these same students appeared to fall short in terms of the critical thinking required to formulate a logical, rhetorically sound, and contextually appropriate argument for their writing courses.

For example, Adrienne says:

it's hard to steer them away from making religious arguments if they are religious and I don't feel like I want to spend my time, as a teacher, getting into that discussion. It gets way too into content and way far away from writing, and partly because I just don't think that most of them are capable of doing the intellectual work to really look at the issue.

Adrienne's last sentence points directly to a lack of critical thinking skills, particularly the ability and/or willingness to approach issues of religion (or issues that invoke religious arguments) in academically and intellectually appropriate ways. For many instructors, Christian students often seem to lack the desire or ability to look at complex issues from multiple perspectives and think critically about their own assumptions and beliefs—standard practice in an academic context, and often cited as one of the pedagogical goals of a composition course (Carter 572; Shor 54-55; WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition 324). Adrienne focuses more on ability than desire

⁷⁰ One surveyed instructor, for example, writes that “some non-Christians were just as unwilling to question their background beliefs as the Christians.”

here, claiming that most of her religious students aren't "capable" of doing the work she expects in her classes. This statement offers a rather hopeless portrayal of Christian students as a group, positioning them almost beyond the reach of instruction.

Despite some instructors' hesitance to make generalizations about Christian students, some of them did allow for certain claims about them, and one such claim was that Christian students were unwilling to consider alternative perspectives, particularly on controversial topics. For example, after responding in the affirmative to the question "Have you ever had a self-identified Christian student in one of your courses?" one instructor goes on to answer the follow-up question, "If so, what do you recall about that student (or those students) and their work?" in this way:

I am frequently surprised by their party-line thinking on these topics [abortion, gay marriage, premarital sex], though I guess I shouldn't be, as most 1st and 2nd year students think as they've been taught to think or are only beginning to question their assumptions.

There are implicit assumptions made in this response, even as the *students'* assumptions are discussed explicitly. For example, the assumption that "party-line thinking" is automatically related to thinking as one "has been taught to think" is left unexamined; it is unlikely that a faculty member who took "party-line" stances on abortion, gay marriage, and premarital sex would be judged by other instructors as a person who had simply accepted what they'd been taught. Also, there is a subtle implication here that students' ways of thinking are as they are because they are "only beginning to question their assumptions." This implication treads the problematic line of equating certain political or ideological stances (on abortion, gay marriage, and/or premarital sex, in this case) with naiveté, a lack of intellectual prowess, or mere remnants of parental control.⁷¹ In this case, the instructor appears to resist the very kind of work that they expect from

⁷¹ There is, of course, something to be said for the intellectual, relational, and spiritual growth that students experience in college. Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development, for instance, outlines ways in which students (and young people more generally) attain moral reasoning skills, and many of his steps toward high-level moral reasoning are encouraged by contexts like a university, where students experience a new, diverse environment. The difficulty lies in deciding which changes in reasoning (particularly ones related to belief) are indicative of development or "higher level" thinking. See Alyssa N. Bryant's "The Developmental Pathways of Evangelical Christian Students" for an overview of various student development frameworks and how they might be applied to Christian students.

students—at least from students who have moved beyond unquestioned acceptance of inherited ideology.

This is not to say that this instructor's response is necessarily unwarranted, nor is instructors' anxiety about a student population whose beliefs appear rigid and nonnegotiable. After all, many religions hold up a fixed and certain Truth, and Christianity is certainly one of them.⁷² It is easy to find representations of Christianity (or organized religion more broadly) as an oppressive, silencing force. And many scholars have noted Protestant Christianity's powerful hold on American higher education well into the 20th century (Bernstein; Edwards; Hollinger; Marsden). Suspicion regarding a historically dominant and often exclusivist religious ideology is not out of line; any number of U.S. scholars, teachers, and students (Jews and Catholics in particular) suffered discrimination and exclusion in the face of the Protestant stronghold on American public education (Marsden 258, 362-3; Nord 73, 234; Urban and Wagoner 96).

It is not surprising, then, that the group of students who most closely adhere to what was so long a dominant discourse in education (and, many would argue, a still-dominant cultural discourse) would cause tension when they appear resistant to concepts or ideas raised in their courses that challenge their beliefs. The academic norm of critical thinking becomes weightier, perhaps, when flouted by the students who most seem to need it. One instructor recalls frustration with a particular student who could not seem to step out of his Christian belief to consider other possibilities or to reflect on his own beliefs. She says, "I think what's frustrating to me is there's a way in which it [a student's disclosure of their Christian faith] appears—can appear closed. 'Because I'm a Christian, these are the things that I think' or 'Because I'm a Christian, these are the ways that I see things'."

While the student above is acknowledging the identity position that shapes their beliefs and ideas (a move generally valued in the humanities), where the student "fails" is in their unwillingness to see that identity as fluid or as only one of many possible

⁷² I am referring here to traditional Christianity. There are many denominations and interpretations of Christianity, some of which take a broader view of truth, or even question the existence of a knowable and certain truth. See *A Voluptuous God* by Robert V. Thompson for an example of nontraditional Christian theology.

perspectives from which to view the world. The problem appears to be less the student's faith, *per se*, than the ways in which that faith inhibits their engagement with critical thinking. Priscilla Perkins argues that "evangelical students are frequently all too ready to argue for their beliefs and not at all prepared to figure out what some of those beliefs mean for their everyday lives" (605), and that may be part of what is at play here—it's not the *having* of faith that leads to instructor frustration, but the appearance of clinging to faith so tightly that there is no room for productive questioning or trying on other ways of thinking. In other words, the work of the composition course requires a particular orientation toward religious belief, an orientation that leaves the student open to the consideration of new ideas, rather than closed off to it.

One surveyed instructor describes an example of this kind of "closed" thinking in terms of students' fulfillment of course assignments. In answer to a question about Christian student writing, this instructor responds:

Often (though not always) their essays were very well written. However, the essays themselves most often failed in their philosophical goals because their [sic] were certain premises that the students wouldn't allow themselves to consider . . . I was often frustrated that students were unwilling to consider these possibilities. Further, and this is the most important point, I believe, it seemed to damage MY credibility in their eyes when I asked them to seriously consider these things. That is, when we reached the point in the semester when I asked them to begin seriously considering arguments that challenged their faith, they began to treat me differently, as if I was just trying to trick them. I am still trying to work on strategies to avoid this detrimental effect.

Of course, these are generalizations. I have had a lot of Christian students, and not all of them fit this mold. Plus, some non-Christians were just as unwilling to question their background beliefs as the Christians.

In this case, the instructor clearly felt somewhat trapped by students' resistance to considering ideas that challenged their beliefs, to the point where the instructor-student relationship suffered. These students did not just resist the academic norm of thinking critically about their faith and opposing ideas; they appear to have changed their opinion of the instructor's "credibility" when this kind of work was asked of them.⁷³ This

⁷³ This rift in the student-instructor relationship raises the question of how instructors and students communicate, or fail to communicate, about the purposes of critical thinking. In this case, it seems that the Christian students were wary of the instructor's motives for asking them to consider alternative perspectives, apparently suspecting that the instructor was "trying to trick them."

instructor seems to have been attempting the strategy that Suresh Canagarajah advocates for working with students who are in some way outside of standard academic discourse. He argues that “students must be encouraged to come out of the safe houses to negotiate the competing discourses of the academy” and then asks, “What teaching methods can we employ to help them make this transition?” (“Safe” 192). This is the question the instructor above may be wrestling with when they write that they are “still trying to work on strategies” to avoid what happened with these particular students.

The tension, it seems, is between finding ways to help Christian students who are resistant to critical thinking and dismissing them for their perceived unwillingness to entertain different perspectives. One interviewed instructor, Adrienne, notes that one of her Christian students “couldn’t understand the distinction between—he couldn’t understand that [what he believed] wasn’t a fact for everyone.” Given the notions of universal truth inherent to traditional Christian theology, the student’s position is not entirely surprising. In fact, Sharon Crowley claims that arguing from premises that are *prima facie* held to be “universally true” is a “habit” of conservative Christians (*Toward* 163), and this instructor seems to have confronted this way of thinking with her student. One dimension of critical thinking is the scrutiny of deeply held convictions or deeply rooted practices and ideas, and it often entails a view of knowledge as contingent and context-determined. The student above apparently “couldn’t understand” how or why to apply critical thinking to his religious beliefs.

Not all instructors share this experience with Christian students and critical thinking. In fact, Nadia says, “I think, to really be Christian here, you have to examine your views” and she sees Christian students as more willing to think critically than most instructors might suspect. Nadia recalls a Christian student in her course who even seemed to enjoy the challenge of critical thinking as he worked on assignments for the course. The student was majoring in neuroscience, and wrote an essay about why he thought that creationism should be taught in science classes as a theory, alongside evolutionary theory. When Nadia challenged him to think through various perspectives on his chosen subject, she found him “very open, and glad that [she] was pushing him on it.” Nadia’s perspective on Christian students’ ability to think critically and question their ideas complicates the image that other instructors offer of Christian students who

are so enmeshed in a religious worldview that they cannot see anything else. In Nadia's view, these students are quite capable of thinking critically—perhaps even particularly capable, as they “really have to examine” their views in order to be Christian at UM.

Nadia also points to instructors' subjective positions (her own included) when reading student writing. She mentions, for example, that she tends to agree with papers that “draw from really liberal sources and speak to liberal values,” but that to her “that's not an argument. That's kind of preaching to the choir.” In other words, Christian students may well have difficulty navigating alternative perspectives, but instructors may need to reflect on how their own worldview affects how they teach these (and other) students to write an academic argument and to think critically about their ideas. At several points during her interview, Nadia pauses and catches herself after making a statement about what “we liberal instructors” think. She notes that it is an assumption that everyone in the English department is liberal, but also notes that she has “never, in teaching here for five years, met somebody who's put forth a conservative view.”

Nadia raises the significant notion that approaches to critical thinking are influenced by a person's ideological framework, leading to a tendency to equate critical thinking with one's own way of thinking. Put another way, instructors' desire to see their students think critically is sometimes troubled by the desire to see students enact or adopt particular political and ideological positions (Freire 65; Hairston, “Required” B1; Sleeter 118; Trainor 632; Tuman 6) and by the difficulty of articulating critical thinking as one of the purposes of academic writing without making religiously-committed students feel that they are being asked to reject a significant part of their identity. As will be shown in Chapter 6, students often define the purposes of writing quite differently from instructors, and they sometimes interpret the push toward “critical thinking” as an indication of an instructor's disdain for their religious beliefs.

Audience Awareness & Rhetorical Context

The final question on the instructor survey asked, “Do you think that it is appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing? Please explain.”⁷⁴ This question elicited a variety of answers—some passionate and forceful, some hesitant, some quite brief and others a page long. A few instructors gave an outright “yes,” citing religion as an important part of human identity and therefore intrinsic to academic work, or noting that “[t]he omission of religious expression is just as telling as the use of it.” One answered “no,” and one said “no,” but then complicated that answer. Almost all (88%), however, answered with a version of “it depends.”

Of those who responded with “it depends,” eleven cited rhetorical situation, particularly the intended audience, as the key factor in determining whether or not arguments that incorporate religious beliefs were appropriate in an academic setting. Some instructors, it seems, think that for a general “academic audience”—to which many essays for composition courses are addressed—these kinds of arguments simply will not work. Yvonne notes the difficulty of communicating this problem to students. She says:

I feel that that’s sort of a line that you have to walk to make sure that they understand that you’re not in any way attacking their faiths, that it’s just about the academic conventions and these kinds of things. But I do feel like it’s hard for students who have never questioned that. That’s enough for them in terms of what makes something true, what makes something meaningful. And then we are saying, ‘but it’s not enough for me.’

Yvonne picks up on one of the most problematic elements of discussing “faith-based” essays with Christian students: there is always the risk that students will see the objection as the instructor’s personal problem with religion (or with them), rather than as helpful guidance for writing in a secular academic context.⁷⁵ One surveyed instructor writes,

⁷⁴ I chose the term “beliefs” instead of “discourse(s)” here because I thought that “discourse(s)” could lead to confusion about what that word meant/what was included in it. The expression or identification of beliefs in writing is inevitably a part of discourse, so I take students’ and instructors’ responses to this question as indicative of their perspectives on religious discourses in writing. I chose the term “religious” instead of “Christian” because I wanted respondents to think broadly about the issue of religious discourses in academic writing, rather than focus more narrowly on what they’d seen specific Christian students do with it (as they’d been asked to do in previous questions).

⁷⁵ A few instructors used the term “faith-based” to describe arguments that Christian students made. I use it here because Yvonne seems to be describing arguments that are literally based in evidence from faith—evidence that is “enough” for students to prove something true, but that is insufficient for the instructor. I resist the term “faith-based” at most other points, however, because it implies a particular usage of religious beliefs. Most instructors do not give a specific enough description of how students are using religious beliefs in their writing to apply this term.

“What gets challenging is how to teach logical argument while not challenging any deep-seated beliefs.” Just as a previously discussed instructor’s “credibility” was called into question when they challenged students to think critically about their beliefs, informing students that certain arguments aren’t appropriate in college writing courses could lead to tension between instructor and student. Placing certain arguments outside the “appropriate” spectrum of argument for the college writing course defines the work of a composition course in a particular way, and this definition may appear to Christian students to be a kind of exclusion, or silencing.

Though some instructors (15%) feel that writing that incorporates religious belief is almost always inappropriate in an academic setting, others cite the nature of the assignment as crucial in drawing a line between acceptable and unacceptable uses of religion in academic writing. Personal narratives or essays, for example, are noted by nine instructors as an accepted and safe place for religious beliefs; in fact, not one instructor decries their inclusion in that specific kind of work. Personal narratives, however, are often set in contrast to “academic” or “argumentative writing.”⁷⁶ One instructor positions personal narrative as the opposite of “analytic” work. These responses indicate that religious beliefs tend to be assigned a particular place in the writing classroom, and that place is in explicitly personal or reflective writing. In a response that echoes many others, one instructor writes:

I am not opposed to the mention of religious beliefs in personal essays. However, personal essays are not central to academic writing. I think these issues arise in composition classes because personal essays are often used as the first larger assignment in a term, a way to ‘jump-start’ the writing. While I myself have used personal narratives to get students writing, I think composition instructors do the students a disservice to focus too much on personal essays.

The construction of the first line—“I am *not opposed* to the mention of religious belief,” rather than “I welcome” or “I’m comfortable with” religious belief—may reveal something about this instructor’s willingness to *tolerate* religious expression, rather than actively support it. And the tolerance only extends to “personal essays,” which are rendered here as vehicles to “get students writing.” The implication is that personal essays are for personal use only—in other words, the audience is very narrow.

⁷⁶ Instructors sometimes used these terms interchangeably.

Relegation of religious expression to personal essays seems, in this example, to set it rigidly apart from the significant intellectual writing that is the “real” work of the composition course.

The instructor goes on to explain that the “disservice” to students occurs because they are not taught to prioritize the kind of writing that will help them best succeed as students. From this perspective, personal writing is only tangential to academic work. Another instructor writes:

To me it is a question of audience. I would tell my students that our educational, scholarly community here is diverse, and as such necessitates an approach that is equally accommodating and based on evidence multiple readers may relate to—unless, of course, it is some kind of exercise in the personal.

In this hypothetical explanation, students are educated about their audience and are asked to “accommodate” the diversity of that audience as they write. The personal is separated out from the academic world once again, as an “exercise” that is somehow out of step with the meatier work of academe. The personal essay, apparently, is relieved of audience consideration, and need not accommodate a diverse readership.

Students may also have difficulty determining how an academic audience (admittedly a rather broad, abstract concept for students to grasp) would respond to essays that incorporate religious beliefs, particularly if they have lived in communities in which faith is woven into many (or all) aspects of life. Adrienne states, “I just think that probably nobody’s ever told them, especially the students from smaller high schools where—or smaller communities—that faith-based arguments are not a part of secular academia.” These students, according to Adrienne, may never have been exposed to the academic norms expected of them at a public university, and are merely doing the kinds of work they’ve done all along. Adrienne recalls a particular student who couldn’t grasp why his theological premises were not successful as the basis for an essay. She remembers that:

this student had lines in his introduction and in his thesis like, ‘Because Jesus Christ is our Lord and savior, we should all do X,’ and the whole paper was based around that premise . . . He couldn’t understand the distinction between- he couldn’t understand that it wasn’t a fact for everyone.

Adrienne's student worked from a thesis that is clearly problematic in a secular academic setting, but this student appears to have had real difficulty understanding why that would be. Eventually, Adrienne found herself in the uncomfortable position of having to shut the student down without his really understanding why. She says, "I had to actually say, 'This is wrong, this is not the kind of argument I'm asking you for. It's based on faith and not on- the kind of logic we've been talking about using all semester'." Adrienne does not mention audience in her story about this student (though she may have discussed it with him at the time), but his failure to conceive of a diverse audience appears to be the primary problem with his work.⁷⁷ Assuming that his beliefs were "a fact for everyone," he composed an argument that could not be convincing to a diverse audience.

Adrienne's experience resonates with other instructors who note the difficulty of balancing kindness towards their students with pushing their students to follow academic norms. When they steer students away from "faith-based" argument, as Adrienne did, they risk casting belief in opposition to "logic," and—more broadly—the work of composition as something rigidly separate from a writer's religious beliefs.

Appropriate Use of Evidence

Closely related to Christian students' difficulty with audience awareness is difficulty with choosing appropriate evidence to support their written arguments. Like the student discussed in the previous section who wanted to argue from the premise of Jesus being "our" Lord and Savior, some Christian students draw from the Bible as a primary, infallible source of evidence to support their claims. The former does not understand who their audience is; the latter does not understand what that audience will find convincing.

The divide between what is personal and what is academic became important in this arena, as it did in the discussion of audience awareness. Seven surveyed instructors and one interviewee, Paige, claimed that evidence from religious texts or from religious experiences can be incorporated into personal essays while casting doubt as to whether such inclusion would be appropriate for a more "academic genres." The reason most

⁷⁷ She also responded in the affirmative when I asked if the student was assuming that the audience was on board with the statements that she found problematic.

often provided is that the rhetorical purpose of a personal essay is quite different from the more general academic essays students are asked to write for composition (and other) courses. Their focus on religious belief versus academic evidence raises some important questions about what “counts” in an academic setting. Certainly, many groups have fought to have their personal experiences count for something in political, social, and academic contexts (feminists, ethnic minorities, gay communities). The 1960s feminist movement’s slogan “the personal is political” leads here to another potential iteration of the sentiment: is the personal academic?

The answers depend, perhaps, on who is listening, and most importantly on how the personal aspect of an essay is executed and utilized. There are many respected, published essays that draw from personal religious experience *and* would be considered academic or intellectual writing.⁷⁸ Most students, however, do not seem to know how to negotiate the balance between personal experience and broader topics (social, political, disciplinary, and so forth), between religious faith and nuanced reflections on that faith. Rather, they tend to invoke religious texts or experiences in simplistic ways.⁷⁹

Persuasion is a key element involved in instructors’ differing reactions to personal and argumentative essays as well. While one could argue that personal essays can be persuasive, it is perhaps easier to gloss over that argumentative element when reading a narrative piece. From instructors’ responses, it seems that it is easier to talk with students about personal essays involving religious experiences, because in some ways the student is simply telling their story, and a kind of faith-based evidence is acceptable in that context. When students attempt to use this kind of evidence in a persuasive essay, the scene changes. Paige puts it this way:

⁷⁸ A few examples: “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives Against the Grain” by Deborah Brandt, Ellen Cushman, Anne Ruggles Gere, Anne Herrington, et al (*College English*); “Blinking in the Sunlight: Exploring the Fundamentalist Perspective” by Peggy Catron (*Encountering Faith in the Classroom*); “The French Guy” by David James Duncan (*Best American Spiritual Writing 2005*); “Serving Faith: Feminist Theory and Feminist Theology Rethink the Self” by Serene Jones (*Religion, Scholarship, & Higher Education*); “Onward, Christian Liberals” by Marilynne Robinson (*Best American Essays 2007*); “Transcending Normativity: Difference Issues in College English” by David L. Wallace (*College English*)

⁷⁹ There are some notable exceptions, of course. One instructor writes of two Christian students: “He was the one student who actually came and spoke to me about writing to improve his argument skills. He was very well-read and a fairly good writer. A 2nd student identified himself through his writing, but not to me personally. His piece that involved religion was one of the best I’ve read.”

The narratives I can handle, the personal narratives I can handle. The, “I went to church camp,” and they quote scriptures throughout and talk about what an amazing experience it is, and that is far less threatening to me than the argumentative paper . . . it [threatening] may be a strong word, except I feel like it speaks to almost the visceral response that I have when I see that, “The reason why I am arguing this is because it can be found in the Bible.” It just absolutely stops me in my tracks.

Paige’s use of the word “handle” demonstrates just how difficult it is for many instructors to deal with argumentative writing that is influenced by religious discourses. She says that she can “handle” the narratives—by implication, she can *not* handle the argumentative essays. The implication is confirmed by her description of her own reactions to argumentative papers that invoke the Bible as evidence: they are “threatening,” they stop her in her tracks, they provoke a “visceral” response. Paige finds herself immobilized by this type of student paper, because it clashes so directly with her definition of good, academic argumentation.

When pushed to think through her reactions, Paige further articulates her response to argumentative essays that incorporate religious beliefs:

as soon as you start getting into persuasion or things like that, that’s when it starts to break down because I feel like there’s gonna be some judgment going on or some messiness that we get into that I can’t get out of because I can’t speak this language, or I’m gonna start thinking less of this student because – so that there are certain genres that feel safer if they’re gonna talk about religion, but other genres that are not.

Paige makes the important point that if a student argues from a position which is very unfamiliar, unconvincing, or uncomfortable (hence the attendant issues of “judgment” and “messiness”) for the instructor, that student’s argument takes on a much larger role than merely another essay awaiting a grade. It becomes a problem for the instructor to solve, and solving that problem may not always feel “safe.”

In fact, it may not even feel possible, if the instructor feels that they “can’t speak this language” of faith that the student is leaning on in their writing. In the scenario Paige describes, the discourses of faith and of academic argumentation are at something of an impasse. Here the instructor has to find a way to respond to a language that she can’t speak, and the whole system of instructor-student communication about student work

“starts to break down.” Paige seems uncomfortable banishing religious discourses entirely, but she appears ultimately to decide it’s for the best if it is kept separate from persuasive essays.

Nadia is also perturbed by the question of whether or not religious faith belongs in a persuasive essay, but she approaches the issue from a different angle. Reflecting on past conversations with her students, she is bothered by the assumptions that the students make about what they should include—and, more importantly, what they should exclude—when writing for a composition course. She says:

I guess one of the things I was troubled by is the number of students who just assumed that writing about the Bible, or writing arguments that involve Christianity, is just not acceptable in academic writing . . . Personal narrative, of course, is where it comes up more often, but—But I think, even in persuasive papers it has a place.

She never explicitly states where this “place” in persuasive papers is, or what it looks like, but Nadia is clearly troubled by the notion of excluding religious belief entirely from academic argument. She is defining the work of composition differently from other instructors, leaving even academic or persuasive writing open to the influence of students’ religious discourses.

It could be that she agrees with Elizabeth Vander Lei that it is important to “negotiate” religious discourses in the classroom and in writing, rather than to make a universal inclusion/exclusion decision. Vander Lei suggests that “by acknowledging the presence of religious faith in our classrooms—maybe even by inviting it in—we can do a better job of helping students recognize and respond to inappropriate rhetorical uses of religious faith in both academic and civic discourse” (3). This negotiation of religious discourses would potentially alleviate some of the tension associated with the issue of where religious belief belongs and make way for productive conversations about the use of evidence in academic writing.

It is not just a question of genre or place at work here; when students draw from the Bible as a source of evidence, logic becomes an issue as well. Some instructors note a common logical fallacy of validating a claim with a version of “because the Bible says

so.” When Adrienne informed her previously mentioned student that his argument wasn’t “based on evidence”:

he would say, ‘Yes, of course it is. There’s evidence in the Bible; of course it’s based on evidence,’ that kind of stuff, so he was surprised about- that I would even question that part of it.

For Adrienne’s student, evidence from the Bible was as good as (or better than) evidence from other sources. Fourteen different survey responses allude to instructor frustration at Christian students’ tendency to rely on the Bible as a reliable, universal source of truth, and some instructors have developed a very direct approach to guiding students towards more standard academic forms of evidence. Yvonne, for instance, simply tells her students that they have to redirect their argument:

So with the writing and composition and trying to get students to form arguments and learn what makes an effective argument, then I find that I have to say, “Just saying that this is the way it is because of the Bible, or this is the way it is because it’s your religion isn’t effective, and you have to come up with another way to argue that.”

It is important to note that Yvonne does not dismiss her students’ religion, or the Bible, as illogical; she simply deems the logic of particular arguments they make ineffective. This is a meaningful choice of words, as it casts the conversation about student writing in terms of specific rhetorical context, rather than whether or not a person’s beliefs are correct or logical.

Arguments that draw from religious beliefs sometimes present problems for instructors even if the Bible is not specifically invoked. One instructor writes on the survey, “Faith is often not something that can be broken down by logic” and is therefore not an easy fit in teaching logical argument. Another survey respondent notes that religious belief “presents a problem in the sense that many ideas are taken for granted, are ‘believed’ without arriving at them through logical reasoning. It provides a problem with regards to evidence in that processes of reasoning are often bypassed.” Yet another writes that their student “wrote about infant euthanasia and tied it to the abortion debate. Because of her religious beliefs, she had a hard time creating an effective argument within academia.” In other words, these survey respondents ascertain that students who

rely on faith-based arguments, or who otherwise incorporate religious discourses into their writing, often do not use the kind of evidence that their instructors consider valid, and therefore have difficulty producing the kinds of logical, argumentative work expected of them.

Tolerance

Tolerance may seem an odd companion to critical thinking, audience awareness, and evidence, but I do think it belongs in this discussion of academic norms. The notion (and goal) of tolerance has become increasingly important on many university campuses across the U.S., and I'd argue that tolerance has become something of an academic norm in many college courses. It is related to critical thinking in that it includes a willingness to consider alternative perspectives, but it also carries its own, separate substance. In a composition course in particular, tolerance is at stake in the ways that students read and discuss assigned texts, and the ways that they wrestle with ideas in their essays.

Instructors' responses to the survey question "What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Christian student?" include a number of words and phrases that address the issue of tolerance, such as:

- Often homophobic
- Judgmental (2)
- Sometimes close-minded
- Not very open-minded (2)
- Suspicious of ideas that challenge their faith
- Sometimes inflexible thinking
- More likely to be offended by controversial materials

While none of these responses actually uses the word "intolerance," they all orbit the term. Being homophobic or judgmental is often viewed as a form of intolerance, and a closed or suspicious stance towards the unfamiliar or uncomfortable could be credited to intolerance as well. The picture painted of Christian students here is not a flattering one

(and it should be noted that there were no “opposite” responses on the surveys to balance it out—“very open-minded,” for example, or “non-judgmental”).⁸⁰

Controversial social and political issues were significant sources of tension between certain instructors and their Christian students, to the extent that five different instructors who participated in this study claim to avoid (or outright ban) certain topics, and one other instructor, Luke, discusses in his interview how several of his colleague ban topics from the classroom. Rather than risking an encounter with intolerant perspectives, it seems that some instructors prefer to cut off potential sources of intolerance before they can be voiced. Adrienne recalls that when she did allow students to write about hot-button social issues, she “got so angry reading their final papers about them because so many of the students, [she] felt were- not intolerant, just undereducated.”

Adrienne chooses a generous (comparatively speaking) interpretation of the student papers that made her “so angry.” Though she sides with the notion of ignorance in her statement, the idea of intolerance was clearly jockeying for position. The implication is that if these students *were*, in fact, “educated” about the issues and *then* produced these papers, intolerance would take over as the explanation for their work. Adrienne cites upbringing and culture as shaping factors in Christian students’ lives in other parts of her interview as well, and she seems to hold these two factors primarily responsible for students’ failure to meet academic norms.

Other instructors place more responsibility on the students themselves. Colin, for example, notes in his interview that Christian students’ resistance to ideas with which they are unfamiliar may point to a conscious refusal to encounter new ideas or ways of looking at the world. He says:

They say, ‘I don’t like this book because it- my faith doesn’t agree with it,’ and it’s like you’re—and I just say, ‘I don’t think you’re being intellectually honest about this’, and I can say that because I have faith and I- like reading *White Noise* does not destroy my faith in God.

⁸⁰ It is possible, of course, that instructors’ responses may have been influenced by specific, unpleasant (and therefore memorable) experiences with particular Christian students in which they felt blindsided or offended by a student’s reaction to a text or issue.

Colin's statement indicates that students are not so much ignorant of academic norms as they are uncomfortable with them or unwilling to do the work required to fulfill them. They therefore try to use their faith as a way out of confronting difficult texts or ideas that make them uncomfortable. Colin quotes his students as saying that they don't like certain texts because their "faith doesn't agree with it," a sentiment quite similar to other instructors' descriptions of "intolerance" in their classrooms. Paige, for example, says:

I really hit a wall when- the first time a student said, 'Well, I can't connect to this text, or to this writer, because he's gay and that is wrong, and the Bible says this, and in God's eyes...' and I found myself- I mean, I remember vividly the first time it happened. It was a student I really respected, and I think I stood still in the middle of the room and changed the subject. Absolutely end of the conversation.

Paige describes this as one of her first and most dramatic encounters with student intolerance.⁸¹ Though she "tried really hard to be unbiased" as she taught, especially as students expressed opinions and beliefs different from her own, this statement went beyond an expression of belief to something that felt threatening to her. Her student's statement clearly came as a surprise—and not just a surprise; it was a violation of her expectations for discussion and conduct in her classroom.

What most profoundly affected Paige, however, was her *response* to the intolerant sentiment. Because she felt "sidelined" by the statement and felt guilty for shutting down the conversation once it was made, she stopped teaching "gay" texts for two years. She says that "it was the first time that [she] really realized [her] own biases and [her] own intolerance" and that she "didn't know how to cope" with that. Since that time, Paige has struggled with the balance between creating an environment where students can speak their minds and creating an atmosphere of tolerance.

Paige adds that while she acknowledges that Christian students are not alone in harboring intolerance for certain groups or ideas, these are the students whom she has most noticed and struggled with regarding tolerance. In describing her anxieties about specific student populations, Paige explains why Christian students (rather than religious students in general) have been problematic for her:

⁸¹ This is a separate experience from the one described earlier in this chapter.

Jewish students, for instance, I tend not to feel that wary of them because they don't talk about the Bible, at least in my experiences, and that the students who have said the most sort of intolerant things, at least when it comes to gay issues, tend not to be Jewish students or Muslim students, that it tends to be the Catholic students who are the most vocal about their intolerances. That's not to say there isn't some other intolerances in the class, but that the Catholic or Christian students seem to be the ones that tend to be the most vocal.⁸²

For Paige, Christian students have been the most willing to vocalize intolerant views, and are therefore the group that makes her “wary.” Not all instructors share this experience, of course. Gina offers an alternative view of Christian students, even those that she identifies as the “praise Jesus” ones:

I should say that the students I described as really identified in a sub-Christian group on campus, who are often the ones who choose to write about aspects of their faith, in my experience, are not intolerant. They are often really curious . . . the people I called the “Praise Jesus” types—they're also . . . I think they really are writing to learn a lot of times, and there's something really compelling about that.

Gina is discussing student writing, rather than in-class comments, and that surely influences the ways in which students and instructors are able to communicate about any potentially intolerant statements. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that Christian students are presented here as people willing to *open up* conversation (through their curiosity and their practice of “writing to learn”) rather than people seeking to shut down certain kinds of conversation, as Paige's student's comment may have been intended to do. Like Nadia's counter-example of Christian students who think critically, Gina's portrayal of Christian students as “not intolerant” but “really curious” positions them not as a particularly hostile group, but as students who are able and willing to engage in tolerant discussion and inquiry.⁸³

Gina (see footnote), Paige, and one of the surveyed instructors mentioned struggling with the tension between addressing student intolerance and what they fear

⁸² Paige is the only instructor to mention Catholic students specifically as a problematic group. This may be a result of her experience working at a Jesuit institution prior to teaching at UM.

⁸³ Despite Gina's generous portrayal of Christian students, her response includes a subtle dig at the students even as it compliments them. Prompted by a follow-up question about the term “praise Jesus type,” she notes that she “couldn't stop [her]self,” and that it was a bit derogatory. She adds that “it's not fair” to use that terminology, and goes on to reflect on the label and its implications. Even Gina, an experienced teacher with some positive personal associations with Christianity, finds herself characterizing certain Christian students in ways that she is not sure are fair or accurate.

might be their own intolerance. They are confronted with the challenge of exhibiting the kinds of work they want from students—in their descriptions of Christian students and in their reaction to Christian discourses—even as they strive to push their students toward that work.

Looking Beyond, or Behind, Academic Norms

The struggles involved with Christian students' violation of academic norms are not a simple matter of these students needing to learn to plug the right words into their writing. At stake in the discussion of academic norms are the definitions and descriptions of what counts as valid work in composition courses, which lead into the murkier waters of competing discourses and competing visions of writing in an academic context. Students and instructors act to protect and reinforce their discourses and visions, often to the consternation of the other group.

For example, if we return to Catron's passage (quoted at the beginning of this section) we see that while the difficult encounters that faculty have with Christian students are often chalked up to "a lack of critical thinking skills, closed-mindedness, irrational thinking, or hostility toward objective investigation," this is not the whole picture. Students may, in fact, be violating academic norms, but the reasons behind those violations are worth exploration. Catron argues that, "Often, what appears to be hostility and closed-mindedness may really be fear—fear of new ideas and the potential for personal loss these ideas represent" (65). It is possible that when students violate academic norms, when they produce work that is out of step with their instructor's notion of academic writing, they are doing so as a kind of self-preservation, as a way of warding off "the potential for personal loss." As discussed in Chapter 4, Christian students sometimes pinpoint fear as a dimension of their college experience, and they have to find strategies for coping with that fear.⁸⁴ Similarly, when instructors resist what they hear from students—when Adrienne avoids "religious" conversations with her students, for

⁸⁴ Though students don't describe themselves as having a "fear of new ideas"—such self-description would be unlikely in most groups of people—the fear of personal loss does seem to be an undercurrent of students' discussion of how their Christian identity seems out of step at UM, or how they are reluctant to express ideas from a Christian perspective.

example, or when Paige chooses not to teach certain texts—they may be defending their own sense of self, their own definitions of what it means to write in a composition course.

Regardless of the causes, there are certainly numerous examples of Christian students failing to meet academic norms, both from the instructor respondents discussed here and from composition scholars who have written about their interactions with these students (Goodburn; Downs; Montesano and Roen; Smart). These examples raise significant questions about how composition instructors can communicate academic norms to their students, how they can respond most effectively when students fail to meet them, and why Christian students in particular sometimes seems less able than others to adhere to them.

Instructor Strategies for “Handling” Religious Discourses⁸⁵

Whatever the sources of tension between Christian discourses and the discourses of composition or between Christian students and their instructors, writing instructors faced with this tension have to make choices about how to respond to the intersections of religious belief and academic writing. They also have to choose how and if to articulate their definition of appropriate “work” in a composition course to the students who seem not to understand it. While instructors make many individual, context-specific decisions in relation to particular classes and students, many of their choices regarding religious discourses in the composition classroom can be placed into two broader categories: avoidance and engagement.

Avoidance

Given the sensitive nature of discussions about religious devotion, and given how unprepared many instructors may be (or at least feel) to take on such discussions in the context of a writing classroom, it is not surprising that some instructors choose to avoid

⁸⁵ I draw the verb in this section title from Paige’s assertion (quoted earlier) that she can “handle” religious discourses in personal narratives but not necessarily within other genres of writing, because the term “handle” resonates well with how instructors are trying both to deal with (or handle) religious discourses in classroom and handle their own reactions to these discourses.

contact between religious discourses and the discourses of composition studies as much as possible.⁸⁶ Like the instructor quoted previously who feels that “religious beliefs ought to generally be eschewed” in an academic context, some instructors (consciously or not) create a classroom environment in which religious discourses have no place—thereby defining the work of composition as distinctly separate from issues of religious identity or discourses.

Brad Peters discovered this kind of avoidance and separation while directing the writing center at Northern Illinois University. He describes the case of a student who came to the writing center by direct order from her instructor. Peters writes:

from the ‘traditional’ academic perspective, the student demonstrated a keen understanding of the assignment . . . Moreover, she seemed to have a reasonable instinct for what strategies might move public conscience. Why, then, had her instructor written on her draft: “Hopeless paper. Go to the Writing Center’?” (122).

Peters observed some of the work that this student did with a tutor at the writing center, and noted that the tutor started by addressing the student’s use of the Bible as evidence in the paper. When Peters asked the tutor why they had addressed this issue first, “The tutor replied that in our first-year composition program: ‘Some T.A.s won’t even accept a paper when students quote the Bible or mention God’” (123). Peters and the tutor wrestled with alternative ways to approach student faith as it relates to their writing. Peters notes the need to help students see how “religious content could support an academic goal,” rather than teaching them to “exorcise” God from their writing (123).

Of course, Peters’ perspective hinges on the assumption that religious discourses *can* be an appropriate and powerful dimension of academic writing, and not all instructors make that assumption. One instructor writes, “I don’t think [religious belief] is as appropriate for academics, but I’m not sure why. I guess it seems like religion is

⁸⁶ A large percentage of composition instructors—at UM and at most large public universities—are graduate students, many of whom have minimal experience teaching writing. These instructors may feel unprepared to negotiate religious discourses in a writing classroom, even if they have experience handling other sensitive issues, such as race or gender. This is not to say that class discussions about race, gender, or other issues of diversity and identity are easy to facilitate, or that instructors feel entirely comfortable doing so. I am merely contending that issues such as race and gender have likely been more prevalent in graduate coursework, in disciplinary conversations, and in the literature/scholarship that instructors encounter in English departments than the issue of religion or religious diversity. Instructors may therefore feel *especially* uncomfortable negotiating religious discourses in an academic context.

only acceptable as a belief system and that isn't relevant to academic arguments." From this perspective, an "exorcism" is warranted, because religious beliefs are not "relevant" to the academic work that students will be asked to do.

Instructors who ask students to rid their academic writing of religious discourses may feel that they are doing the student a favor in terms of helping them understand what is expected of them at an institution like the University of the Midwest. The instructor quoted previously who writes, "I do not think that religious beliefs are an appropriate form of evidence in the majority of academic writing" could certainly argue that they are fostering students' academic success by asking them to keep their faith largely separate from their coursework.

Though she does not necessarily express support for the ways in which religious belief is handled at UM (and, in fact, she expresses sympathy for Christian students who may feel excluded in certain academic contexts), Yvonne notes that the kinds of knowledge most valued at UM tend not to make room for religious commitment. She says:

I think I – mostly what I mean is this sort of – the way that we privilege logical reasoning as the way of creating knowledge. Or, I guess, empirical research. But, both of which won't allow for a religious line of reason – or emotion, there's other things that get sort of booted out. But I think just by the silence around it and the non-inclusion, that's where I see [the exclusion of religious commitment].

There are instructors who consciously foster a kind of "silence" or "non-inclusion" of religious discourses in their classrooms in order to avoid certain kinds of problematic student writing. One instructor "go[es] out of [their] way to avoid some of the more obvious hot topics where religious ethics are more intractable (abortion, capital punishment)." In other words, by eliminating specific topics that would be most likely to elicit responses grounded in religious discourse, the instructor (presumably) avoids student essays that present "intractable" religious beliefs—at least in relation to particular social/political issues.

Adrienne tries to steer students away from incorporating religious discourses into their writing because she "do[es]n't feel like [she] want[s] to spend [her] time, as a teacher, getting into that discussion." As noted earlier, she feels that student incorporation

of religious discourses leads to conversations that are primarily about content, and she also wonders if Christian students are “capable” of doing the kinds of work she expects.⁸⁷ Operating from that presumption, avoiding religious discourses is only practical for Adrienne, as they result in frustrating, content-driven conversations with students she has little chance of helping.

Though avoidance of religious discourses may in some cases be related to instructors’ personal feelings about religious discourses or Christian discourses in particular, that doesn’t appear to be the norm, at least among the participants in this study. The instructors who avoid religious discourses seem to do so more because it does not fit into their notion of writing in the context of a composition course, or in the university more broadly. For instructors who see religious beliefs as irrelevant to academic assignments, or who view religious discourses as impediments to rigorous intellectual work, maintaining distance between religious discourses and the writing classroom appears to be beneficial for students and a relief for instructors. Adding to this the fact that instructors may feel incapable of productively addressing religious discourses in the classroom, avoidance may in fact appear to be not just the best option, but the only one.

Engagement

In *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom*, Bronwyn Williams writes:

When confronted by students who write about religious topics or use religious rhetoric, some writing teachers advocate avoiding a response to the writing by raising the concept of audience. They tell their students that the academy is not the appropriate context for their work and ask how the students might reframe the issue for a secular, academic audience . . . relying on this strategy to avoid responding to writing that is clearly of profound importance to students is unethical. If we encourage students to write about what matters to them, to put their thoughts and ideas on the page, we have an ethical obligation to let them know that they have been heard (Elbow 2000, 31). This is particularly true if

⁸⁷ Adrienne’s dismissal of “content” in the context of discussing student writing is interesting, given some scholars’ resistance to the notion that student essays can (or should) be evaluated strictly on “the writing”; these scholars operate under the assumption that form and content can’t be strictly divided (Crowley, *Composition* 224-5; Goodburn 345; Knoblauch and Brannon 4).

they have had the courage to address issues that risk alienating their teacher (Payne 2000, 120). If we tell students the academy values the free exchange of ideas, we cannot refuse to respond to their ideas (108).

Clearly, Williams (and others, such as Montesano and Vander Lei) would take issue with some of the avoidance strategies described in the previous section, even those that are framed as beneficial to students' success at UM. Though Williams acknowledges audience awareness as a point of concern for instructors, he critiques some instructors' tendency to rely on the issue of audience awareness as a "strategy to avoid responding to writing that is clearly of profound importance to students." To avoid religious topics or religious rhetoric is, according to Williams, an "unethical" dismissal of student ideas.

Not all instructors view avoidance as the only—or even the best—strategy for handling religious discourses in the writing classroom. In fact, more instructor participants advocate some form of engagement with religious discourses than propose or describe avoiding these discourses.

A few instructors at UM share Williams' concern about an easy dismissal of religious discourses, arguing—as some Christian students do—that religious beliefs are a core part of identity for many people, and can be a part of intellectual development. They write:

Religion is part of our identities. The omission of religious expression is just as telling as the use of it. I think it needs to be used in a way that is appropriate for the genre of writing, but it is not something that should be forbidden or hidden.

Religious beliefs play an enormous role for many people in determining core aspects of our identity—who we think we are, who we want to be, what we think our purpose in life is supposed to be. Religious beliefs give meaning to people's lives. As a result, I think it's just as appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing as it is to incorporate other cultural differences like race, ethnicity, social class, and gender.

I would say that incorporating religious beliefs into academic writing isn't problematic in and of itself. It's HOW it is done. I believe the academy should protect the open-minded pursuit of truth, wisdom, and self-understanding. Any writing that furthers this goal is appropriate.

All three instructors write about religious belief as something in need of protection in an academic context. These instructors seem to agree with students who discuss writing as intimately connected to their identity as Christians, in that they see academic writing as

an appropriate forum for discussion of various identity markers, and they acknowledge these identity markers as an inevitable part of a student's work. Most importantly, all three instructors position religious identity as an element of academic work and development, rather than an impediment to it. Here the work of composition is defined, in part, as the development of writing that incorporates "cultural differences" and furthers "the open-minded pursuit of truth, wisdom, and self-understanding."

The instructors quoted above do note caveats to engagement with religious discourses: religious belief needs to be "used in a way that is appropriate for the genre of writing" and religious belief in academic writing needs to be in service to the pursuit of appropriate academic goals. Still, the presiding sentiment in the three statements is that religious discourses do, in fact, have a place in the composition classroom. As the first instructor notes, "The omission of religious expression is just as telling as the use of it." Implied here is a parallel danger to uncritical, seemingly anti-intellectual use of religious discourses; the omission, or exclusion, of religious expression "tells" something—about the classroom environment, about what identity boundaries have been established there, and perhaps about the instructor.

These instructors do not address the question of *how*, exactly, to engage with religious discourses in the writing classroom; they simply answer the question asked of them, about whether or not it is appropriate to do so. When instructors responded to the question about their experiences with Christian students who had incorporated their religious beliefs into their academic writing, however, ideas of how to engage (or examples of how an instructor had attempted to engage in the past) became more prominent.

For a few instructors, the question of engagement seemed relatively easy, as they had had Christian students who incorporated their religious beliefs very effectively. The instructor whose student wrote about whether a fetus was a life and "was really writing to clarify his own thinking" provides an example of a Christian student who appears to have made all the right "academic" moves, even as he approached a question that could easily lead to a staunch "religious" response. The fact that the student's work communicated an attempt to "clarify his own thinking" indicates that the student was open to new perspectives on the topic and was aware of writing as a means of inquiry. Still, the

instructor was clearly open to the student's exploration of a topic that often invites religious discourse, and the student met the instructor's norms for how such a topic should be approached and addressed.

Another instructor writes, "Because traditional evangelical Christianity puts an emphasis on 'the witness' experience, I've found Christian students to be very careful observers if you put the assignment in the correct context." Though it is unclear how the instructor is connecting the "witness" experience—typically a declaration and explanation of one's faith to an audience—to careful observation, what is clear is that this instructor feels that they have successfully engaged Christian students by drawing on this particular strength.

Others have had more complicated experiences that required them to navigate the fine line between criticizing a student's use of religious discourses and appearing critical of the religious beliefs themselves. One instructor engaged a student's religious discourse both in office hours and in a full-class workshop, only to have the student cling more tightly to his use of Biblical evidence and have two other students validate that choice. The instructor writes:

I have had students want to write about everything from horse-meat slaughter houses to global warming from a religious perspective. I had a student . . . who wrote an argument for environmental literacy, which he based on the chapter of Genesis. His argument claimed people needed to understand global warming better so they could better protect the planet. The warrant for this was that it says in Genesis that humans are to guard over the animals and the earth. While I encouraged the student to either look at multiple religious perspectives on the relationship between human behavior and stewardship or to supplement his argument with a discussion of the ethical implications . . . on a community/agency level rather than relying entirely on the Bible for such support, he believed I was looking to human and flawed resources for a divine claim. When we workshoped the paper in class, I hoped to address the cultural validity of the Bible as warrant while addressing the academic and multicultural issues inherent in relying on it exclusively in a scholarly paper. Whereas this approach had worked before, I actually had two students support the "academic" nature of the Bible in the class and after received encouragement to accept Christ in my life from all three students in emails and polite after class conversations.

This instructor took a twofold approach to the problems in the student's essay: first, they addressed the issue with the student, hoping to broaden the scope of the student's argument. Second, they opened the essay up to the class, with the hope that other

students would point out some of the problems with using the Bible as the only source of evidence in an academic paper. Though the instructor seems to have had past successes with these strategies—at least with the workshopping—both methods of engagement failed in this situation. The student interpreted the instructor’s initial comments as encouragement to look to “human and flawed resources.” In the workshop, the two students who spoke up in support for the Bible’s “‘academic’ nature” seem to have shut down any conversation about the use of religious texts as evidence, or at least the kind of conversation the instructor was hoping for.

The instructor above also experienced an interesting power dynamic. Though the instructor had the power to comment on and evaluate the student’s writing, and to organize a workshop addressing the issue of Biblical evidence, three Christian students challenged the instructor’s authority, fairly directly. The students may not have consciously viewed their actions as assertions of power, but they did, nevertheless, position themselves as the ones with the right answers and the instructor as the one lacking a key source of knowledge. In some ways, this story is an example of student and instructor competing directly over the rights to define what counts in a composition course.

Not all instructors encountered such opposition to engagement. One writes:

In all of the cases described above [in which students used religious beliefs as evidence], I explained to the student why I felt that including their religious beliefs was not appropriate, while also emphasizing that I was not criticizing their faith. All of these students understood my comments and revised their essays.

Incidentally, I recently tutored a Muslim student and encountered the same scenario. I mentioned that I thought his faith was not a relevant response to the assignment, while emphasizing my respect for his beliefs. He also revised his response to omit those passages.

The instructor does not mention (and perhaps does not know) how the students felt about these revisions, or how they reacted to the instructor’s assurances that their critique was based on appropriateness for the assignment, and not the students’ beliefs. They do, however, say that the students “understood” the comments and revised accordingly, signaling a relatively smooth and amicable interaction. The above statements could potentially be interpreted as “avoidance,” as the instructor appears to have recommended

omission of religious discourses from the students' papers, rather than a more appropriate incorporation of religious belief. However, if we take the instructor's confidence that religious beliefs were "not appropriate" for the assignment at face value, it does seem that they engaged students' religious beliefs to the extent that the reasons for suggested revisions were explained, discussed, and understood.

Mark Montesano claims that engaging with religious discourses in the classroom is an opportunity to push students to analyze and critique their own beliefs. His sense of engagement as opportunity places a great deal of responsibility on the instructor, because it comes with the warning that avoidance is an irresponsible waste of that opportunity (85). Others share this sense, arguing not only that students have a right to explore religious discourses in the classroom, but also that instructors have an obligation to help students do it. Kristine Hansen writes, "I believe writing teachers must come to grips with students' desire—indeed, their right—to express their religious views in the writing classroom" (25). Mark Edwards warns that "Not mentioning religious (or analogous) convictions does not make them go away," and he encourages instructors to "model for students how scholars manage subjectivity" (2). Mark Noll calls for "respecting the integrity of students and for encouraging them to function as intellectual agents ultimately responsible for their own learning" (161). Nancy Thomas and Anne Marie Bahr argue that faculty need to make "[b]oth the religious and the nonreligious . . . open to inquiry, critique, and exploration of the foundations of their views" (6). A surveyed instructor writes:

I think the critical responsibility lies with the instructor. This is a fine line, of course, because many instructors tend to disregard or dismiss the value of a student's religious beliefs. Instead, I think that opening up a conversation about them as beliefs, wrapped up in a particular point of view allows students to translate religion to the discursive realm. It is naïve, of course, to suggest that religious beliefs, particularly of monotheistic faiths, are akin to other life value systems, like being vegan, an activist, or a Pistons fan. But getting students to talk about these differences may be productive.

The "critical responsibility" instructors have, according to this instructor, is to foster conversation about religious discourses rather than disregarding or dismissing them. The strategy seems to be to inspire a kind of metadiscourse about beliefs, incorporating other kinds of "value systems" as points of connection or comparison. For this instructor—and

for the scholars quoted above—an important part of the work a student does in a writing course is reflecting on their own beliefs, whatever those beliefs might be.

Other strategies for engagement offered by instructors include a similar kind of metadiscursive approach to religious beliefs. For example, one instructor writes that “often when students are writing persuasive essays, they’ll call on the Bible as a source. We’ll talk about the Bible as an authoritative text, etc. Can the Bible be invoked in a logical argument?” Another writes, “In argumentative writing I think [religious belief] can be a significant part of establishing ethos as part of persuasive technique (if it’s relevant to the topic of argument).” Both of these instructors deliberately draw attention to how religious beliefs affect students’ writing. Religious beliefs are engaged, and they are engaged purposefully in order to help students participate in the definition of academic writing, of their work in the writing classroom.

In “Bringing Faith and Spirituality into the Classroom: An African American Perspective,” Mark Giles, Odelet Nance, and Noelle Witherspoon propose taking a slightly different—but still metadiscursive—approach. They write, “For example, in English classes, writing assignments could focus on negotiating faith in the classroom and follow up with small-group discussions of how and why faith is important to them and how it might enhance their learning experience” (97). Rather than drawing attention to how religious discourses affect writing, these authors offer writing (and discussions) as a means by which students can think about how their religious discourses affect the classroom and their learning (and presumably, therefore, their writing as well). Though this is a different strategy for engagement, it still makes a conscious move to foreground religious discourses, and to offer opportunities for students and instructors to sort through the complexities of encountering religious belief in the classroom.

Perhaps most importantly, all of these strategies treat students’ religious beliefs with seriousness and respect. Hansen argues, “The salient point is this: If we allow free expression in the public square and on the college campus, we have to take seriously not just people’s *right* to assert their beliefs. We must also take seriously their *beliefs*” (30). The strategies listed above do not ask instructors to feel personally that religious beliefs should be granted equal intellectual weight with other ways of thinking; what they require is for instructors to acknowledge the academic intersections of faith, writing, and

higher education, and to give students' beliefs space in the classroom. Engagement, in some sense, challenges instructors to question and expand their definitions of what the "work" of a composition course is and should be.

Implications

Given the constellation of factors informing instructors' decisions about how to address the challenges presented by religious discourses in the classroom—anxiety and frustration surrounding the nature of certain kinds of religious beliefs, or the ways in which some students express those beliefs; concerns about critical thinking, audience awareness, evidence, and tolerance; and questions about what kinds of writing belong in composition courses—it is not surprising that some instructors opt for avoidance when faced with students' religious discourses.

It appears, however, that many instructors are more interested in engaging with religious discourses, at least in some way, than in avoiding them altogether. There are those who would rather there be a firm boundary established between religious discourses and the discourses of composition academic discourses, but the majority—as evidenced in the data provided here as well as in the scholarship of composition studies—seem to acknowledge engagement as part of their pedagogical work.

Defining this pedagogical work, as well as the work that students are expected to do, remains challenging, however. Those with definitional power—and in the case of writing courses, this is generally the instructor—have the power to determine what is considered valid, appropriate, and right. David Claerbaut claims, "Simply by defining education, one is led to ask about the nature of humankind and its very purpose. There is, invariably, an implicit strain of philosophy or theology present" (43). Though he is addressing the much larger issue of education, and writing instructors may not be taking on questions quite this broad when they define the work of composition courses, Claerbaut's statement is worth considering for the way it highlights the always subjective nature of definition, and the less visible implications of defining the purposes of a course or of students' writing.

Though they are not labeled as such, definitions of the work of composition emerge from instructors' reactions to Christian students' work. Instructors seem to view the composition classroom as a place where marginalized voices can be heard, where all students feel safe to express themselves, and where students confront challenges to their ideas. Instructors expect students to reflect critically on their own ways of thinking, to make rhetorical decisions based on intended audience, and to learn how to manage personal beliefs and evidence in academically appropriate ways. These goals for the writing classroom and for students often remain tacit, however. As Schiappa argues, definitions can begin to seem obvious or natural "when used unproblematically by a particular discourse community" (29). When instructors encounter students who resist what seems obvious or natural, they are challenged to articulate their definitions more explicitly.

The student-centered nature of composition studies also complicates and troubles the notion of instructor-centered definition. This is not to say that instructors should not define the work of composition; it may not even be possible for them to avoid doing so. Rather, the act of definition itself may warrant more direct attention, particularly in light of students' competing senses of what their writing is for. The following chapter focuses on students' ideas about the work of a composition course, and how they react and respond to instructors who seem not to understand those ideas.

Chapter Six

“I CAN’T *NOT* WRITE ABOUT IT”: CHRISTIAN STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES TO ACADEMIC WRITING

This chapter explores Christian students’ experiences in the writing classroom, their thoughts on the intersections of faith and writing, and their perspectives on how religious discourses are included and excluded in their writing courses. Students’ descriptions and definitions of the work of the composition course emerge from their recalled experiences, and these descriptions and definitions sometimes conflict with those offered by instructors. Though students are not always attempting to define the work of composition, and though their definitions are sometimes shifting and contradictory, the ways in which students articulate the purposes of their writing (and the purposes of using religious discourses in it) shed light on the difficulty that Christian students and writing instructors can have in understanding each other. Their definitions also highlight some important points of overlap between the two groups’ visions of the writing course. These points of comparison are significant in making sense of how students’ definitions might influence their apparent resistance to particular kinds of work, and of how students and instructors might be talking past each other when they discuss student writing.

Because there is so little previous scholarship that incorporates Christian students’ perspectives on academic writing, I have had to rely more on social sciences research in this chapter than in the previous ones. I do, however, put my findings here in conversation with my findings from Chapter 5 in the “Implications” section at the end of the chapter, and I note at certain points throughout the discussion how findings from student data resonate with scholarship on writing and identity and on student-centered pedagogy. In one case, a student even makes this connection herself, invoking the ideas of Paolo Freire in order to describe an ideal classroom.

The definitional work that students do is complicated by the power dynamic between them and their instructors. That is, even as students articulate the work of the composition course and the purposes of their writing, they are cognizant of the instructors' greater power to decide what belongs and what is valued in their classrooms, as well as their power to assign grades to student work. The power dynamic does not necessarily change students' perspectives on the legitimacy of religious discourses in the composition course, but it does factor into students' decisions about asserting those perspectives.

The first part of this chapter addresses how hesitant some Christian students are to incorporate religious discourses into their writing, and how this hesitation relates to instructors' power to define the work of the composition course. The discussion then moves to students' arguments for the legitimacy of religious discourses in academic writing, followed by students' articulations of strategies for deciding whether or not to incorporate their faith into their writing. Finally, I discuss a particular student's narrative about a paper that incorporated religious discourse as an example of how students enact their definitions of academic writing and select strategies for responding to an instructor's competing definition.

Student Hesitation and Instructor Power

Though their stories differ, several student respondents cite an overall atmosphere of avoidance in the writing classroom regarding issues of faith, and six different students express some fear about bringing their faith into their work. In some cases, the avoidance of religion appears to be imposed by instructors, or by the general atmosphere of writing courses. One student survey respondent writes, "rarely do I feel as though spirituality and faith are considered legitimate topics of discussion." Another respondent, who had apparently taken a writing course that assigned texts related to religion, comments, "Oddly enough, we limited discussion of religion, despite the religious nature of our reading." Quinn remarks that no one talks about religion in class, perhaps because "nobody really knows each other, everybody's kind of reserved." Rebecca argues that it is rare to have conversations about "deeper things than school" with her classmates, even

though she gets the sense that a lot of people want to have those conversations. A surveyed student says, “I do not think [that incorporating religious belief into academic writing] is very accepted because I wrote a paper from a Christian perspective & my teacher said it was too personal because I included God.” Another student says that their “religious” essay was met with the response, “it was nice, but not appropriate.”

For one reason or another, all of these students have (at least at times) experienced writing classrooms as places in which religion is not welcomed as part of the discussion. Whether mere shyness is a factor, as Quinn speculates, or whether religion is truly not considered a “legitimate” topic of discussion, these students note the absence of religion as a dimension of class discussion. In their study of faculty’s role in creating space for the discussion of religion and spirituality, Judy Rogers and Patrick Love found, when they talked to students, that “there was a pervasive sense that their faculty must deem it legitimate to bring these conversations into the classroom, and then the faculty must carefully craft an arena where differing perspectives could be voiced and contrasting stories shared” (57). The students quoted above seem to have that same sense—that there *could* be space for religion in the classroom, but it first has to be legitimized by their instructors. In other words, the power to define the work of composition is largely in the instructors’ hands.

Students’ own fears of rejection or judgment contribute to their decisions to disclose or hide their religious beliefs in the classroom as well. In addition to anxiety about being made fun of or looked down upon for their faith (see Chapter 4), student respondents note a fear of offending people (Isabelle and Grant, for example, both worry that broaching the topic of Christianity could cause offense) or of making themselves or others uncomfortable. For Isabelle, feeling unprepared for questions is a factor in her decisions to include or exclude her faith in papers that her peers might read during a workshop. She says, “And so I think, ‘oh my goodness, if they read my paper then it’s going to bring up questions that I maybe don’t want to answer or, you know, I don’t want to...’ I want there to be peace among everybody.” Isabelle appears to guard her own right to explain or not explain her beliefs, but she also seems concerned about potential conflict with her classmates if questions about religious belief are raised. Amidst the uncertainty about what belongs in the writing classroom, there is also an indication here

of a sense that the writing classroom is supposed to be a place where everyone is comfortable, where there is “peace among everybody.”

Though Isabelle, in her senior year, claims that she finally “came to a point where [she] didn’t care anymore, even if [she] was going to be judged,” response from her peers was clearly a significant factor for her in her earlier college years. Writing courses, with their emphasis on workshop and peer review, raise potentially uncomfortable situations for students who incorporate religious beliefs into their writing, as Isabelle points out above. Grant, for example, says:

I feel like a teacher is pretty knowledgeable, like how to give you constructive criticism, but when we got into groups . . . they would just like to attack your point, like rationalizing in their mind, where they’re saying, “Well, you know, if you can address all these points then you have a good paper.” So they would just come out with every disagreement.

Grant has apparently felt uncomfortable in some workshopping situations, in which he felt that his peers were looking to “attack” his point, rather than provide the kinds of “constructive criticism” that the instructor would give. Again, the underlying idea seems to be that the composition course should be a context in which all students feel comfortable and respected. It seems significant, however, that Grant appears to equate a reader wanting to “attack your point” with a reader pointing out “every disagreement”—a potentially uncomfortable, but also potentially helpful, form of feedback. It’s clear that Grant experienced such feedback as unconstructive (as he casts it in opposition to the instructor’s feedback), and his peers may, in fact, have been “attacking” him. It is worth considering, though, how critical feedback and student comfort may not always be possible to balance.

Grant’s experience complicates issues raised by instructors who have encountered Christian students who appear callous toward certain other student groups, because here we have a Christian student who has felt marginalized because of his Christian identity. Grant’s experiences are similar to what Rogers and Love found in their study at one public university. The authors conclude that:

students who identified as religious felt they would be ‘outliers’ if they shared this aspect of themselves, despite the program’s stated value of openness. These students were hesitant to bring their faith perspectives into the class dialogue. As

one observed, “I think that [it] is still hard to be fully open and honest [about one’s religious beliefs] because we are still feeling everyone out and we don’t want anyone to judge us” (54).

The authors argue that in this context, “the religious dimensions of students’ meaning-making had to be brought from the margins of the dialogue to the center” (57). Though Rogers and Love are not addressing composition courses specifically, their data reinforces some of the statements made by students about their writing courses at UM.

Christian students did have some ideas about how religious belief might be brought “to the center” of the writing classroom—or at least be made a more visible, and more acceptable, form of expression. Theresa, for example, holds up as an ideal what she refers to as a Freirean model of education, arguing that Freirean pedagogy makes room for all students’ perspectives—religious ones included—and creates a safe space for making those perspectives known. She says:

Those classes, like the one I just came from, the professor sits in a circle with us and we are all talking as people relating to other people. If someone has a question or a problem, we turn and we focus on that person for a moment, and we try to help them work through whatever’s going on. In that environment you’re very, very supported and you’re very respected . . . Those are safe environments where even though you – definitely I get nervous still in that environment and saying, everyone does I think, saying anything that they believe if it’s off the norm. You know that you’re – someone if they have a question or a criticism they’re going to say it in way that’s respectful to you.

In a big lecture hall there’s not space for that because even if you said something and everyone in the room agreed they’re not going to all clap or they’re not going to say, “All right, let’s take a moment and analyze what this student said and see how that applies to what we’re doing and see if we can grow from here and maybe advance the work that we’re doing.” It’s like, “Let’s get back to topic now. Thank you for sharing that comment.” Not that it’s unsafe in the sense that people shouldn’t say anything, but we’re told indirectly that it’s unsafe, I guess.

Theresa goes on to say that the Freirean model of education allows for critical thinking and questioning, whereas the “other” model—the kind described in the second paragraph above—perpetuates silent, passive acceptance of course material. She says, “If you’re going to just take everything as it is, then the model of education that says ‘Don’t speak up about your faith in class; just stick to the material’—that makes sense then.”

Theresa’s vision of a Freirean classroom does not remove fear from the equation—she still gets nervous sharing a belief that’s “off the norm”—but it does establish an

atmosphere in which students are “very, very supported” and “very respected” in the expression of belief.⁸⁸

Theresa echoes instructors’ concerns for a safe classroom, as well as their emphasis on critical thinking. The difference here is that Theresa advocates the encouragement of religious perspectives in order to achieve those goals (though she does not mention how the inclusion of religious discourses might cause others to feel silenced or “unsafe.”) Theresa appears to see a contradiction in attempting to create a safe, critical classroom and excluding some students’ perspectives. Her example also points to the great power that instructors wield in developing the atmosphere of their classrooms and defining the work that is done there; despite her student-centered, Freirean vision of education, Theresa’s model of an effective classroom still positions instructors as the ones who can make the choice to open up or shut down certain conversations.

The kind of atmosphere described above is not entirely absent from UM classrooms, of course. It should be noted that some student respondents (15%) had at least one positive experience with their composition instructor following the integration of religious discourse into an academic paper. A surveyed student writes that their instructor was “very happy I chose the subjects I did,” one writes that their instructor was “very open and supportive,” and another writes that their instructor’s response was “mostly positive and affirming.” Rebecca felt that the paper she wrote for one writing course that drew from her faith was “an opportunity to get to know [her instructor] better” and says that the whole experience of interacting with her instructor regarding her essay “was really awesome.” What these experiences tell us is that students’ caution about integrating religious beliefs into academic writing may not always be based on a predictable outcome. While there is evidence to suggest that some instructors discourage

⁸⁸ Isabelle, Grant, and Theresa all discuss how peers influence the dynamics of a classroom, particularly in terms of feeling “safe” to express one’s ideas. Though peers may be a significant factor for some Christian students in deciding how and if to incorporate religious discourses into their work for composition courses, student respondents were not specifically asked about peer relationships. Most did not address the issue, and it is not possible to know if this is because they were not specifically asked or because peers are not significant factors in their decisions regarding religious discourses. Because there is insufficient data for noting patterns or forming hypotheses about peer influence, I will not devote much attention to it here. It is important to recognize, however, that this may be a fruitful area for further research on religious discourses in college classrooms.

religious perspectives in their classrooms, students shouldn't necessarily assume that this is the case.

What seems more certain is that there is tension around the definition of the work of composition, particularly in relation to the role of religious discourses in academic writing. Christian students express uncertainty about what is considered a valid part of the composition course and about how instructors will respond if students do incorporate their religious beliefs into their writing. As discussed in the following section, students hold strongly to the idea that religious beliefs have (or should have) a place in the writing classroom, but they acknowledge their limited power to legitimize it.

Students' Arguments for Legitimacy

Despite the hesitation many students have about expressing religious beliefs in their academic writing, they make arguments for the inclusion of religious discourses in the composition classroom. Their arguments for the appropriateness of religious discourses stem from and contribute to students' (not necessarily conscious) definitions of the work of composition.

Christian students have varying perceptions of their place within the campus community, of how instructors respond to their beliefs, and of how instructors and students should or should not approach religion in the classroom. Where they are much more unanimous is in their response to the question of whether or not religious beliefs are appropriate in the context of academic writing. Three-quarters of student survey respondents said that it was appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing. The remaining 25% of respondents said that it was appropriate to incorporate religious belief into academic writing, but they added caveats: that it was appropriate only for certain assignments or in particular contexts; that the religious belief had to be relevant to the topic; that the use of religious belief should not be "preachy." All interviewed students agreed that there was no rigid dichotomy between religion and academics, most speaking at length about their own experiences with the intersection of faith and writing. Including the "yes + caveats" responses, 100% of surveyed and

interviewed students responded in the affirmative to the question *Do you think it's appropriate to incorporate religious belief into academic writing?*⁸⁹

The unanimous response is striking, especially in response to a question that drew such varied responses from instructors. Also striking is the amount of explanation added to these responses, despite the fact that the question contained no follow-up prompt (such as *please explain*, or *why or why not?*). Few students (12%) answered a simple “yes” to the question; the vast majority provided a rationale for their responses, perhaps indicating that this was a subject that they’d thought through prior to encountering the question. The most common arguments students made for the appropriateness of religious discourses as part of academic writing were: writing is a form of self-expression and therefore draws from the writer’s sense of identity; religious beliefs can be part of an academically strong paper and a challenging learning experience; and disclosing religious beliefs is important in terms of audience awareness and evidence.

Writing as Self-Expression

For some students (25%), the very notion of what it means to write is tied to their identity as Christians. These students often described writing as a form of self-expression, and therefore held that the “self”—with all attendant beliefs—is inevitably, or ideally, revealed in the text. One student comments, “Writing, I believe, is an expression of your beliefs and thoughts. Religious beliefs are an important part of this.” For this student, the nature of writing itself calls for the inclusion of the author’s religious beliefs. In discussing how she is always, inevitably, thinking from a Christian perspective, Isabelle states, “So I think that’s terrible then, if people are afraid or can’t really express themselves using their belief in God to write. I mean I don’t think they should be separated.” Isabelle considers a scenario in which students are prevented from

⁸⁹ I chose the term “beliefs” instead of “discourse” here because I thought that “discourse” could lead to confusion about what that word meant/what was included in it. The expression or identification of beliefs in writing is inevitably a part of discourse, so I take students’ and instructors’ responses to this question as indicative of their perspectives on religious discourse in writing. I chose the term “religious” instead of “Christian” because I wanted respondents to think broadly about the issue of religious discourse in academic writing, rather than focus more narrowly on their own experience with it (as they’d been asked to do in previous questions).

incorporating their religious beliefs into their writing by an external or internal force—they *are* “afraid to” or “can’t” draw from their beliefs as they write. Isabelle argues that faith and writing shouldn’t be separated, that it is “terrible” for students not to be able to join the two. Here we have an implied definition of the writing course as a context in which students can express themselves, and in which writing is not artificially separated from students’ beliefs. Separation of writing and belief, the argument seems to be, contorts the very essence of what writing is for.

Other students carry this notion further, expressing concern that not allowing religious beliefs to be used in academic writing is akin to discrimination against religious students. One student comments, “I think it’s appropriate because everyone should be able to express his or her beliefs,” suggesting that the ability to draw from religious beliefs in academic writing is a kind of right or freedom. Another student makes that claim outright, writing, “Yes [it is appropriate], because it is part of what I believe and I should not be discriminated against for what I believe when others are not. I feel everyone should have that right.” These responses indicate that some students see religious identity as one of the many forms of student diversity in need of respect and protection at the University of the Midwest, and that the writing classroom should be a place where diversity is acknowledged and cultivated. Some are perhaps even a bit resentful about the amount of attention paid to religious diversity relative to other types, as evidenced in the following response: “I believe it is good to express one’s beliefs in academic writing. This university should not only reflect ethnic diversity.” For this student, religious belief is not only appropriate for academic writing; it is a vital part of reflecting the University’s diverse student body. This response echoes Susan Handelman’s concern that “While we encourage a very free discourse about political and sexual identity, we are silent about our spiritual sides,” that we have “elided religion as one of those factors that goes into making of identity—not even hearing it as a ‘marginalized’ voice” (204).

For some student participants writing courses appear to be ideal contexts in which to express and explore these different facets of identity. Grant, for example, says that writing courses are contexts in which one’s faith is likely to be relevant. He describes himself as someone who doesn’t “walk in [to classes] with a banner on [his] head that

says ‘I’m a Christian’,” but notes that he is more likely to discuss his faith openly “especially in a writing class, because you’re talking about feelings and hot topics and stuff. Like my economics classes, no. But argumentative writing and just other writing classes, [my faith] definitely will come out more because that’s part of who I am.” In Grant’s estimation, the composition classroom is a site for debate and controversy that invites students’ beliefs.

Rebecca similarly points to writing classes as appropriate sites for disclosure of religious belief. She contrasts them to art classes, where she finds it difficult to talk about her faith, and says that writing courses are different because in “writing, you write about your stories and stuff.”⁹⁰ Grant and Rebecca view writing as intricately connected to identity, as a practice that invites a person’s “feelings” and “stories.” A surveyed student describes how they drew from their faith in an essay for a writing course, stating, “I was writing about my identity, why I believe in racial equality, social justice, and nonviolence. My faith is the core of that.” Here again is a student who recognizes a connection between writing and identity; in this case, the student’s faith serves as the foundation for their arguments for racial equality, social justice, and nonviolence.⁹¹

Another surveyed student writes that they think religious beliefs are appropriate for writing “as long as it is academic. You can write from an ethnic, immigrant, female etc point of view and faith/religion is another aspect that shapes who you are and therefore should be allowed.” By connecting religious faith to other points of view that stem from identity markers (ethnic identity, immigrant status, gender), the student appears to make a connection between the kinds of diverse perspectives welcomed or expected in the writing classroom and their religious identity—though the writer does not specify what it means to draw from religious identity in an “academic” way. If these other aspects of identity are acceptable, the student seems to wonder, why would religious identity not “be allowed” as well? In fact, some students comment on how hard it is (or would be) to keep their faith *out* of their academic writing. Isabelle comments,

⁹⁰ Rebecca is not distinguishing between genres of writing here, or between disciplinary expectations for writing—she does not indicate that she does any writing for her art courses—but appears to be talking about writing in a broad sense. Perhaps problematically, she seems to present writing as something that exists solely in the realm of composition courses.

⁹¹ It’s worth noting that these students do not make a distinction between “personal” essays and “argumentative” essays, as did some instructors. These students appear to see all, or most, writing that they do in relation to personal beliefs.

“I think no matter what, I can’t *not* write about it because it’s such a big part. So even if I don’t write a paper on God I think I’m still coming from a different- I’m still coming from using that part of my life to write the paper.”

Jamie shares a similar perspective. Despite a challenging, frustrating—though still rewarding—experience with writing a paper that incorporated her religious beliefs (to be discussed in more detail later in this chapter), Jamie says that she would likely write another paper from a Christian perspective in the future. She says, “I probably would because I live my life and my beliefs and everything are so focused on my religion, that it’s really hard for me to not include that stuff, even when it’s really not necessary in there . . . Because the way I think is based on my Christian beliefs.”

Like Isabelle, Jamie positions herself as inescapably situated within a particular worldview, just as “postmodern thought, feminist theory, and cultural studies have relentlessly critiqued the notion of an objective subject, of an ability to speak above or beyond ideology” (Handelman 204). A survey respondent writes, “sometimes I feel when I discuss things I feel like it comes from a basis of Christian ideals, and sometimes I have a hard time truly viewing things other ways,” again presenting the notion of the writer’s inability to step outside of their ideological frameworks. Despite their apparent difficulties adhering to academic norms (as noted by instructors in Chapter 5), some Christian students actually appear to follow very closely the same kinds of arguments about identity and writing that many composition scholars and instructors would uphold as well (hooks, *Teaching* 88; Kirsch and Ritchie 140; Murray 208; Paley 43), though students may not always be executing written work in a way that instructors or scholars would support. Writing, as described by these students, is a kind of ideological work, always situated according to the worldview and identity of the author.

Other students comment less on the inescapability of ideology and more on how the personal significance of their beliefs drives their inclination to connect them to their writing. The inclusion of religious discourses in their academic writing may have more to do with a desire to share their faith with others, or with their desire to write about what seems most important to them, than with an inevitable move within their worldview. Theresa, for example, says simply, “I made it known that my faith was important to me

and was part of my motivation to everything that I was doing.” This seems a conscious choice to make religious belief the center of her academic work.

Rebecca makes a similar move, viewing her faith as something wonderful to be shared with others, sometimes via academic writing. She says, “And it [faith] started showing in my writing, ‘cause it’s so important to me. It’s absolutely amazing, and I want to share it with people . . . and I’m not pressuring anybody to believe what I believe. It’s just that I’m sharing something that I love with other people.” For Rebecca, incorporating religious faith into academic writing makes perfect sense; she is focusing on something she loves, and she is—in an apparently non-aggressive way—putting what she loves out there for others to discover as well. She does not seem to recognize the potential of this kind of writing to be interpreted as proselytizing, even if she is not intending to “pressure” anyone with it.

A surveyed student takes a slightly more evangelical approach, writing, “I welcome opportunities to induce thought about Christianity among my peers, and it permeates my thinking, attitudes, and ideas—so it’s hard not to [include it in academic writing].” This student writes with the express purpose (though it may not be their *sole* purpose) of “induc[ing] thought about Christianity” in their readers. Despite making this conscious choice, however, this student also comments on the way that their faith “permeates” their “thinking, attitudes, and ideas,” thus leaving some question about how much control they have over the perspective from which they write. Again, we see writing as linked to identity, but these students are also defining the work of composition as a means by which one can speak to or persuade an audience.

For these students, the incorporation of religious discourses into academic writing seems practically inevitable, and desirable as well. As one student states, “all writing carries with it the perspective of the author, and (academically) religion is just another of these inherent perspectives that must be recognized.” According to this student, the definition of writing—academic writing included—is bound to identity. The problem, from this perspective, is not the students who choose to draw from their faith in writing courses; it is the writing courses that do not make room for this choice.

Faith Serves an Academic Purpose

Along with those who felt that academic writing was a form of self-expression that reflects—or should reflect—the beliefs and perspectives of the author, five students argued that the incorporation of faith into their writing could serve or had served specific academic purposes. One student states simply, “it helped to bring ethos to my argument.” Jamie concurs that religious belief can be used to build an argument, though she cautions that it only works effectively “as long as you’re not using it as the only way and the only fact behind something . . . you can use it in your argument, I think, but you also can’t use it as fact, necessarily.” Jamie appears to support the use of religious belief in academic writing as an option, so long as it is used appropriately. Echoing that sentiment, another student writes, “It shouldn’t be restricted. It should be an option like anything else.” Like the students who discuss writing as a form of self-expression, these students seem to favor a view of religious discourses as just another in a series of rhetorical alternatives available to writers as they construct an argument.

Other students thought more in terms of the “big picture” of belief and education—and how the two worked productively together—rather than in terms of specific essays they’d written. A surveyed student writes:

I think it certainly shouldn’t be barred; it’s a major part of most people’s perspectives and past experiences. I think it’s appropriate when the issue of religion isn’t looked down upon and [is] considered significant while the option to ignore religion is still understandable. We all believe in something. Some people just believe in not believing in the non-obvious, intangible, or immaterial.

Despite the assumption that religion is “a major part of most people’s perspectives and past experiences”—a debatable claim—this student takes a kind of live and let live approach to the use of religious beliefs in academic writing: it should be an option, but not a requirement, and it should not be “looked down upon,” but should be “considered significant” like other kinds of work. They then recast religious beliefs not as an anomaly in the academic world, but as the norm—because “we all believe in something.” The fact that some people’s beliefs are religious in nature and some are not apparently makes no difference; the significant factor is the universality of belief. Absent here is consideration of how some ways of knowing may be (or seem) more problematic than

others in an academic context; also absent is recognition of how religious discourses may not always suit particular rhetorical situations.

Theresa approaches the issue from a different perspective, arguing that allowing students to engage with their own spirituality (or other identity issues) in their academic writing is a positive, intellectually challenging pedagogical method. In a continuation of her discussion of Freirean pedagogy, she explains why she thinks that students often won't discuss their faith unless they're in "safe environments" and why she herself is often reluctant to reveal her beliefs. Theresa says:

Part of that goes back to this very anti-Freirean model of education that we're under. You're expected to stick with a topic and that's going to get you an A. Your participation needs to— you need to participate, but your participation needs to reflect what you're learning, which means you need to reflect exactly what's being said in the class. If that's not exactly what's being said in the class, then you're not going to say it.

She then goes on to describe what she sees as a more Freirean, student-centered, and more intellectually rigorous model of education:

I guess what I meant by safe environments are, for me, they've been classrooms where we're expected to go outside of the lines. Like, "Here's suggested reading and here's this paper you need to write and you need to pull from these things, but I want to know what you're thinking." That's the professor saying, "Get beyond that."

Theresa presents an example of an instructor asking a student to move beyond writing what they think the teacher wants to hear; in fact, the instructor specifically says, "I want to know what you're thinking." This kind of educational context pushes students to "get beyond" the raw material of the course and delve deeply into their own interpretations of it. Theresa's invocation of Freire informs her distinction between educational contexts in which students are asked to parrot given material and those in which they are asked to explore their own responses to that material. In other words, she draws from Freire's comparison of classes in which "the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat" to classes in which learning happens "through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (72).

From this perspective of “humanizing” education, the incorporation of religious beliefs into academic writing potentially serves a crucial intellectual and developmental purpose. An emergent definition of the work of composition portrayed here is that it asks students to explore their own beliefs and to practice incorporating those beliefs into writing in rhetorically effective ways.

Religious Beliefs Help the Reader

Though issues of audience and evidence were often cited by instructors as most problematic for students who incorporated religious discourses into their writing, three students specifically reference religious beliefs as serving an important function for the reader.

Jamie, for example, says, “I don’t necessarily know if I would write, ‘I believe this because I’m a Christian,’ but I think that it would probably be necessary at some point to do it just because it would help the reader understand where I’m coming from better.” Jamie makes a distinction here between offering simplistic explanations—‘I believe this because I’m a Christian’—and including information necessary to help the reader understand her position.

Rebecca has a similar perspective. She says:

I think it’s important for your reader to understand, like in argumentative writing, it’s important for them to understand where you kinda come from, your- why you believe the things you believe. If it’s relevant to the topic, yeah, but if it’s not, I don’t feel like it’s necessary. ‘Cause you don’t want to ever- you, if you’re making an argument, beliefs aren’t- they’re not like fact, it’s not an actual, factual thing that you can- you know?

Like Jamie, Rebecca views religious beliefs as a way to serve the audience, because it’s important for the reader to understand the writer’s beliefs. Rebecca also makes a distinction similar to Jamie’s between appropriate and inappropriate ways to incorporate belief. She cautions that religious beliefs are important only “if it’s relevant to the topic” and that they should not be presented as fact.

A surveyed respondent offers a more straightforward opinion on the use of religious belief in academic writing—though their shorter, more blunt response may have more to do with the differences between surveys and interviews than with representing

their full views on the issue—that echoes Jamie and Rebecca’s thoughts on religious belief and audience. The student writes simply, “Absolutely. I think it often helps me understand the author more.” What makes this response unique is that the student positions themselves as the *reader* in this case. From their perspective as a reader, they appreciate the inclusion of the author’s religious beliefs.

Jamie, Rebecca, and the surveyed student all identify part of the work of academic writing as helping the reader to understand the author, so that the reader knows where the writer is “coming from.” Though the students demonstrate a kind of audience awareness here, it is quite different from the academic norm that instructors highlight. What the students seem to leave out is reflection on how the *reader’s* beliefs should shape the writer’s choices, focusing instead simply on communicating their beliefs to an apparently passive audience.

Other students, however, approach audience differently, weighing in on how hard it can be to incorporate religious discourses into writing in a way that aids audience understanding and engagement. When asked whether they had incorporated their faith into their academic writing, one surveyed student writes, “Most of the time I don’t. I find it hard to do that because we are trained to be ‘objective,’ which does not include the topic of faith.” This response is curious, given that a major tenant of much contemporary theory (most notably postmodernism) is that “objectivity” is essentially impossible because people are always perceiving the world from particular, shifting subject positions (Ellingson; Foucault; Gabardi). Somewhere along the line, however, this student has learned, directly or indirectly, that the subjective nature of faith renders it unfit—or at least very risky to employ—for an academic audience. And they are not alone. Another student writes that they do think that it is appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing, “but after a negative experience, [they] tend to defend from a neutral position.” This response raises further questions about the possibility of true neutrality, but it is clear that—possible or not—neutrality strikes the student as a safe or ideal position from which to “defend” their ideas to their reader.

These students are encountering difficulty with their own conceptions of the work of composition. Though they responded in the affirmative to the questions about whether religious beliefs were appropriate for academic writing, they find themselves pushing

against them because of perceived direction from instructors. What they are “trained” to do does not seem to match their initial notion of what writing is for.

Even for students who don’t strive for neutrality, there is caution around the incorporation of religious discourses in relation to audience. Though Isabelle seems confident in the general appropriateness of the intersection of faith and academic writing, she does note the care with which one’s language must be chosen, and the care a writer must take to avoid assumptions about their audience’s belief system. She says:

And I think another thing we do, just in life as Christians that I'm realizing is, we use a lot of jargon, like Christian things that people - we're not aware of- there are a lot of people who don't believe the same thing as me. And if you're trying to explain you got to go from different points, you know, who are these people, who is this person and you know, what makes them them?

Isabelle holds up an ideal of a very empathetic author—one who avoids “jargon” specific to her particular faith community, and one who seeks to understand the audience. She argues that this kind of writer will inevitably produce a more effective text and will be more likely to persuade her audience:

[S]ay you have a professor, they're not coming from my same worldview of being a Christian, possibly. So I think you have to keep that in mind and you know, keep your audience in mind. And not that I'm trying to go around it, but I'm almost trying to try even harder for them to see, maybe from a different standpoint, you know, it's not so close-minded, it would be, you know. Because I'm sure professors have heard the same thing from Christians, maybe that's why they think they're close-minded because they all write, people write a lot of the same thing, use the same verses to back it up, instead of maybe really exploring the topic more.

Ultimately, Isabelle is encouraging an attitude toward argument that stretches Christian student writers, that pushes them to “keep [their] audience in mind” and make that mindfulness evident in their work. Like the students quoted earlier, Isabelle is focused on the reader understanding the writer’s point of view; the difference is that she presents understanding as best achieved by a writer who considers her audience carefully and makes rhetorical decisions appropriate for that audience.

Jamie offers a similar perspective on audience awareness, and also emphasizes the management of evidence in light of that awareness. She says:

you have to look at your audience and you have to consider them . . . Like you have to consider other people's points of view and you have to- you can use it [religious belief] in your argument, I think, but you also can't use it as a fact, necessarily, because people won't take it as fact if they don't agree with your beliefs.

Jamie connects audience and evidence in a very practical way here, arguing that a writer not only has to “consider” the audience, but think through the kinds of evidence likely to persuade that audience. Two surveyed students take up this line of thinking as well. One writes, “In some circumstances it's okay [to use religious beliefs in academic writing]. Maybe basing an argument off it but not to the point where the readers think you are Bible crazy.” The other writes that it is okay to incorporate beliefs “to a limited extent, kept relevant and without preaching.” Along with Jamie, these students argue for a thoughtful, tempered integration of religious belief.

These students describe a sense of audience that aligns much more closely with instructors', especially in comparison to other students' notion of audience simply as readers who need to understand where the writer is coming from. These students offer a more nuanced definition of the work of academic writing—one that allows for religious discourses, but that also places the responsibility of audience awareness on the writer.

Student Strategies Regarding Faith & Writing

Students' definitions of writing in the composition course—as an (ideally) objective practice, as a form of or vehicle for self-expression, as a practice tightly linked to identity, as a means for persuading an audience, as a site for critical thinking—combined with their anxiety about instructors' reactions to religious discourses in academic writing leave them to make tough choices about how or if to draw on their religious beliefs as they write. Although all student respondents agreed that it was appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing (at least in certain contexts), only half had actually done so in their own writing. Of those who chose not to draw from their beliefs in their writing, a little over one-third said that the topic just didn't come up or didn't seem applicable to the course; a few said that they didn't write about their faith because they were either not Christian or were struggling with their faith

when they took their writing course(s); and the remaining students indicated the instructor as the reason for avoiding religious beliefs in their writing.

A process of “feeling out” the instructor and a mindfulness about being graded cropped up most often as students’ strategies for determining how their faith would or would not factor into their work in the composition course. Just as students’ definitions of the work of composition are influenced by their vulnerability relative to the instructor’s authority, their strategies regarding the incorporation of religious discourses into their writing reflect the power dynamics of the classroom.

Feeling Out the Instructor

Even for students who did use religious discourses in academic writing, “reading” the instructor seemed to be an important strategy in deciding if and how to incorporate those discourses. As one student writes, “It depends on the teacher. You can kinda feel them out to see how far you can go, and that influences how I choose to talk about the subject.” For students like this one, determining how “far you can go” with religious beliefs may have little to do with an instructor’s direct comments about religion or about the student’s writing; it is more an abstract art, a process of “feeling out” the instructor.

Students who cite “tension,” “hostility,” and “sarcasm” as instructor responses to their use of religious beliefs in academic writing may be relying on the “feeling out” strategy outlined above, because these terms (with the possible exception of “sarcasm”) give more of a sense of a general vibe that students picked up from instructors than of specific comments or feedback on their writing, especially because they appear as one-word responses to the question. Another student writes that their incorporated religious beliefs received, “Not much of a response. Definitely felt some tension though.” Still another writes that their instructor was “surprised and we talked a bit about the church that I attended. She didn’t seem too alarmed but she had a look that told me she thought I was kind of weird being a college student serious about my faith.”

For these students, choices about the intersections of faith and writing are sometimes based on nonverbal cues they get from instructors, and the students have to decide how to interpret those cues. Theresa, for example, recalls one instructor’s

feedback on a paper in which she wrote about “peace activism and how it relates to Jesus.” She says, “The only thing he said was that he wanted me to establish a more relevant connection . . . It was just, ‘Don’t go too far out on a limb here’.” When asked what she thought her instructor meant when he said “don’t go too far out on a limb,” however, Theresa says, “He didn’t say that. I think that was my interpretation of it.” Theresa did receive some specific feedback on her writing—she was urged to forge “a more relevant connection,” which she later says was the instructor wanting her “introduction to have a more concrete connection with what [she] was saying”—but she also got the unspoken message not to go too far.

For other students, the element of warning or caution came more directly from their instructors. One student had an instructor who said that her paper “was beautifully inspired, and since we read the Bible for class I could use it in the paper in an ‘academic sense,’ but not get too focused on the spiritual aspect.” Another student had an instructor whose response was “Caution that I should avoid being cliché or dogmatic in my writing.” The “don’t go too far” message is more direct in these cases; students are explicitly cautioned about the potential risks of including religious discourses in their writing, and/or they are advised about how to try and manage those risks. In one sense, warning students of the risks of their rhetorical choices is an important pedagogical move for writing instructors. On the other hand, such warnings may send the message that the use of certain aspects of identity must remain limited for Christian students in ways that they are not for other students.

Even before instructors say anything at all, however, some students speculate about the instructor’s reaction to their writing as they make choices about turning in papers that draw from their faith. When Isabelle turned in an essay written from a Christian perspective, she “expected [the instructor] would either just be total, you know, not to say anything about it, just grade, and then you always- but then I always think in my head, ‘I wonder what, you know, what were her thoughts on that?’” The fact that Isabelle would “always think” about the instructor’s reaction to the religious dimension of her essay indicates a level of anxiety about the response she might receive and about how the instructor would think about her. After all, as Isabelle points out, the instructor might judge her based on religious beliefs “because that’s [her] first impression of me.”

The risk of a negative reaction causes some students to steer away from writing papers like Isabelle's. These students sometimes assume that their instructor would respond negatively based on in-class comments or professed social, political, or religious values. Here is how four students explain their decision not to write from a Christian perspective:

I had a very liberal English teacher who most likely would have looked down on the apparent "narrowness" of Christian values.

Non-Christian writing instructors tend to think that a Christian POV would be biased.

I think they expect a dichotomy between religion and academic in students. They expect students to agree with them in most cases, because they believe their view is the logical one.

I felt [my religious belief] would be taken as emotional, with no fact to back it up.

These assumptions leave students to decide just how important they think it is to incorporate their faith into their writing—is it worth the potential risks? Isabelle, though worried about her instructor's reaction, ended up having a positive experience, as did a surveyed student whose instructor's response "seemed fairly welcoming and positive." In contrast, we have a surveyed student, cited previously, who had drawn from faith in an essay at some point in the past, but "after a negative experience" now tries to be "neutral" in their writing. Other students try to defend from a neutral—or at least less controversial—position from the start. Holly, for example, chose a paper topic on which she "had a view that was, [she] figured, would be kind of line with [the instructor's]."

Another student, Grant, took something of a middle ground, choosing to incorporate his beliefs into his writing, despite feeling fairly certain that his instructor would disagree with them, and perhaps look down on him for doing so. For example, Grant knew that his instructor would disagree with his perspective on "the sanctity of life"—primarily because of "his little side comments in class"—but chose to write from that perspective anyway. This choice appears to have worked out well for Grant. He says:

The professor is a lot smarter than me, and he came up with other arguments that I could've talked about. This guy was- I don't know, he- I think he was like, 'Yes, that's a good argument.' I never felt disrespected. I knew that he disagreed as far as what I was saying about life . . . I knew going into it he doesn't agree, but it was a good paper. So I got an A-.

Grant seems to feel that his paper was fairly evaluated, and that his professor—despite disagreeing with Grant's perspective—never “disrespected” him.

It is possible that some of the students quoted above, the ones who chose not to incorporate their beliefs due to a sense that the instructor would disagree and therefore respond negatively, could have had experiences similar to Grant's had they chosen to write from a Christian perspective. Grant may be something of an anomaly, however, in that he doesn't demonstrate the concern that many students would have about turning in a paper with which they “knew” their instructor disagreed. He accepted a potential risk that other students might reasonably have avoided.

Protecting the Grade

Not surprisingly, Christian students—like many students—are highly concerned with their grades when they complete course assignments. Theresa, for example, states that while the fear of “will I be graded down for this?” isn't too prevalent a concern for her anymore, “[g]rades are still in the forefront of your mind.” This preoccupation with grades sometimes determines what students choose to include in and exclude from their papers, and also to think more consciously about the instructor as an audience for their writing.

For students, this can mean writing essays that their instructor will “agree” with. As noted in the previous section, when Holly was asked to write about a controversial issue, she chose one on which she had an opinion that her instructor was likely to agree with, because she “didn't really feel like the professor wanted to hear” what she had to say on other topics. From “certain comments” that the instructor made, along with her assumption (acknowledged as such) “that female English professors are liberal,” Holly made a strategic choice of topic for her “controversial” essay. She says:

in high school, I was a little more gutsy, because I figured that I was gonna get an A, anyway, no matter what I wrote about, as long as I wrote about it really well.

But now that, you know, things are stepped up in college, I might've written about abortion . . . And I do think that, to some extent, she would've tried to have been non-biased and really grade on my argument, but I still think there's just something innate that if you see something different than what you believe, you'll see holes in their logic more than you would in somebody arguing what you believe.

Holly is picking up on a great difficulty of *teaching* writing as well: responding to papers that express a view that instructors find in some way offensive, disturbing, or wrong. She could bank on the A in high school “no matter what [she] wrote about,” but the stakes have changed in college. What's interesting is that the change is not apparently due to increased demands on her *writing*, per se, but to more stringent (perceived) demands on her choice of topic.

Isabelle confronts similar feelings about instructor response to student papers, noting, “I think you think that maybe a teacher would grade you better if you, you know, are saying things that they agree with, and they're like, ‘oh, those are good ideas’.” She recounts the story of her boyfriend, who took a course with a professor who announced on the first day of class that he didn't believe in God. Her boyfriend had some in-class debates with the instructor, which he thought that the instructor encouraged, given the philosophical focus on the course. He participated in class, got A's or high B's on all of his papers, but received a C for the course. When he emailed the instructor for an explanation of his grade, he never received a response. Isabelle's take on this situation, and on the broader question of instructors who may grade students according to alignment with their own beliefs, is not that instructors expect only one opinion to be voiced in their classrooms, but that “they connect more with people with their view.” Isabelle's statement raises the issue of audience, and in particular the notion that the instructor is the primary audience for college writing. When writing students think about audience, they tend to think primarily of their instructor—an understandable instinct, as the instructor is often doing most, or all, of the reading and evaluating of each paper.⁹²

⁹² As noted previously, there is also some evidence that students consider their peers as they compose. However, considering how their peers might react to what they've written strikes me as a slightly different issue than considering one's intended audience. Students are aware that *some* of their peers *may* see what they've written, but they are certain that their instructor will. Most importantly, they know that the instructor will be grading their work.

Christian students sometimes avoid religious or moral issues in their essays, citing a wariness (like Holly's) of instructor response to and evaluation of such papers. Faced with a survey question about whether they had ever identified as a Christian in their writing courses, one student writes, "I don't think I came out and said it—generally my papers had to be arguments on an issue and few of them [instructors] looked kindly upon the church." This student opted to side-step issues of faith in the context of a writing classroom because of their instructors' views of the church. The implication here is that drawing upon ideas that the instructor does not "look kindly upon" in an essay will negatively influence how that essay is read and evaluated. Also implicit is the notion that silencing one's Christian identity is the logical, most practical choice in this context.

This survivor mentality is evident in another student's response to the same question. Addressing their decision not to identify as Christian in their writing, the student writes, "I felt that picking a topic that wasn't a 'moral' one, but a matter-of-fact [one], would get me through." The student implies that an essay that took on a "moral" issue would *not* get them through, at least not as smoothly. Like the student above, this student has chosen the path that appears most practical, and the path of least resistance.

Jamie's Essay

Most of the interviewed students mention at least one specific writing assignment into which they incorporated their religious beliefs, and those experiences helped shape some of the perspectives and strategies shared in the previous section. Jamie went a bit further than some of the other students, sharing the entire narrative surrounding a paper she wrote for her composition course that caused problems because of its "religious" nature, and she refers back to this paper throughout her interview. She describes her first draft, the instructor's initial comments, her struggle to revise and to communicate with her instructor, and the lessons she learned from the process. Jamie's experience—especially because her reactions and struggles are common to newer writers who are asked to do substantive revisions—offers an example of some of the challenges students and instructors face when they approach a writing assignment with different expectations and assumptions.

Here is how Jamie describes the assignment and her initial draft:

We were doing a research paper and my- I decided to write about- one of the papers [texts] we had read earlier was about how the environment, how Christianity makes- people who take the Christian faith mistreat the environment. That was the argument that the other essay was making. So I wrote a paper that was saying how—the opposite opinion—that Christian beliefs and things in the Bible actually encourage us to live in community with the environment.

And so basically my whole paper was about the Bible and what it says and my beliefs behind- basically it was my interpretation of the Bible, because that was the whole point, that was my argument was that it wasn't the Bible itself that was saying 'mistreat the environment' or not. It was the people who are interpreting it a certain way.

Jamie positions her paper as something of a response to a text that she'd read for her composition course. Though she describes the assignment as a "research" paper, she then presents her essay as taking the "opposite opinion" of the assigned text and says that her paper was "basically... [her] interpretation of the Bible"—descriptions that do not mesh well with the standard academic concept of "research."

Jamie does, however, describe an organized process of collecting evidence and attempting to work with that evidence appropriately. She says:

I was using examples from the Bible and examples from other religious texts and stuff . . . I would say a phrase from the Bible and then interpret it one way and interpret it another and show the contrast between the two and how it does depend on interpretation and not- So you can't blame the faith itself, you have to blame the person . . . I used different websites with different interpretations. I mean, my main source was the Bible where I was getting the phrases from, but I was using other interpretations, other people's opinions as well as mine.

This description presents the paper not merely as Jamie's interpretation of the Bible, but as a commentary on Biblical interpretation itself. Jamie describes a process in which she takes a Biblical phrase, presents multiple interpretations of that phrase, and then addresses the fact that the interpretation of the phrase may determine a person's actions—so that "you can't blame the faith, you have to blame the person." When Jamie describes the ways in which she uses evidence, she presents a very different image of her paper than in her initial description. The "whole point" here is not to give her individual interpretation, but to present different interpretations and to discuss how those differing interpretations may influence people's actions.

It seems that Jamie's first description more accurately matched what happened on paper, however. When she turned in the draft for comments, her instructor (whom I will call Danielle) "came back and she told [Jamie] that it was hard for her to grade it because it was so opinion based." Thus began Jamie's struggle to revise. Jamie was surprised at Danielle's response, saying, "I honestly had no idea that it was going to be this big- end up being this big process of changing everything." She also found the response "kind of disappointing, because I was happy with the paper and then it's like she had issues with it." Clearly, Jamie's idea of what a paper like this was meant to do was quite different from her instructor's. Judging by the instructor's reaction, it seems that Jamie's work may have fallen more under the definition of writing as a form of self-expression (it was "so opinion based") than of writing as a form of inquiry. Though Jamie intended to do a research paper, what she actually produced was apparently something quite different.

Despite her feelings of surprise and disappointment, Jamie seems to have had amicable conversations with her instructor about revision, saying, "it was good to meet with her." She also seems to have been open to the comments that Danielle gave her. She says that Danielle:

came in and she's like, you know, 'I can't grade this because I can't comment on your beliefs, but I can't grade it by not commenting on your beliefs,' and it just didn't match up how it worked out, so . . . I think I wrote it toward a religious audience, somebody- people who believe the same thing I do, whereas I needed to make it, again, more general. It all had to be generalized.

Here Jamie recognizes one of the problems with her first draft: she made assumptions about her audience's beliefs. She acknowledges that "that's kind of bad because I'm not thinking about the fact that other people have different beliefs," and that by just writing "the way [she] felt," she was making unconscious assumptions about her audience. Jamie is one of the students who stressed the importance of incorporating religious beliefs into writing in order to help the reader understand where the author was coming from, and it's possible that that was her plan as she composed this paper. As noted in the discussion of religious discourses as aids to readers, however, a focus on communicating the writer's beliefs can lead to the dismissal of how the audience's beliefs factor into the success of the essay.

Jamie uses the word “general” or “generalized” four times in her interview to describe the kinds of changes she tried to make to her essay as she struggled with audience awareness. For Jamie, making her paper “generalized to everyone” meant really rethinking some of her claims and acknowledging that she “had to give both sides.”

Though Jamie and Danielle seem to have focused much of their attention on issues of audience awareness, Jamie also points to the ways in which beliefs—hers and Danielle’s—factored into their conversations and into her revision process. As noted above, Danielle was uncomfortable commenting on Jamie’s first draft, because she felt that she would be commenting on her student’s beliefs. Jamie says:

I know it was very difficult for [Danielle] when she came across it [religious belief] in my writing, because she didn’t know how to react to the way I was expressing my beliefs and faith in the paper . . . I know it was difficult for me to keep my beliefs out of it, and so it’s hard for her to keep- to understand my beliefs, because she doesn’t necessarily agree with me.

Like other students, Jamie acknowledges the difficulty of resisting her own beliefs as she writes. She seems to see both her beliefs and the instructor’s beliefs coming into play here, however; hers because they were affecting the rhetorical success of the paper (in that they left the audience not knowing how to react), and the instructor’s because they made it difficult to understand why Jamie would express herself in this way. Jamie almost offers a parallel between her beliefs and the instructor’s. She starts, “it was difficult for me to keep my beliefs out of it, and so it’s hard for her to keep...” but then changes directions and concludes, “to understand my beliefs.” Though Danielle’s beliefs have not seemed to be the issue up to this point, here Jamie points to the instructor’s beliefs as factors in the evaluation and revision of this paper.

In fact, when Jamie returns to a discussion of what the problem with her first draft was, she says:

I don’t think that it was necessarily that I was drawing from the Bible. It was just that she didn’t really- I mean, I- honestly, I don’t know what her beliefs are, even after all that went on. But I mean, obviously, she didn’t agree with what I was saying . . . So I think that was the issue. So I could’ve drawn- it was fine that I was drawing from the Bible, but the way I was writing about it in my paper was like it was a fact, and that was the problem, that she didn’t consider it a fact.

In this statement, Jamie places greater weight on the instructor's individual belief system than on the importance of writing a "generalized" paper. She says that "the issue was" that Danielle didn't agree with her; "the problem" was that Danielle didn't consider the Bible to be fact.⁹³ Jamie is still recognizing how her writing affected an audience, but she also implies that Danielle's comments might have been different if Danielle had agreed with her points, or if Danielle were more inclined to believe the Bible was factual. At the end of her statement above, Jamie says that she wrote about the Bible like it was fact, but in this moment she acknowledges that move as a problem *only* in that Danielle didn't interpret the Bible in the same way. The implication in some ways reduces Danielle's comments to personally or ideologically motivated feedback, rather than academic guidance that could have come even from a Christian instructor.⁹⁴

This is not to minimize the work that Jamie did, or to insinuate that she didn't take her instructor's comments to heart. Despite the problematic aspects of the statement above, Jamie does seem to have picked up on the significance of making assumptions about one's audience—and not just about the instructor. She "adjusted" her paper "by saying that 'this is a possibility' . . . instead of saying 'this is the fact'." She acknowledges that she can't use her beliefs "as the only way and the only fact behind something. You have to consider other people's points of view."

Jamie says that revising her paper was "just very confusing and hard," because at first she didn't understand what she needed to do. She rewrote the paper "a couple of times," and she remembers, "in the end, it still wasn't completely what [Danielle] wanted, but it was- she was able to grade it, so that was good. But it was just very frustrating. I remember talking to my mom, and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, this paper. It is taking forever'." Despite the difficulty, however, Jamie identifies the struggle with this paper as a positive experience. She says:

⁹³ I understand Jamie to be stating that Danielle didn't agree with her, and the reason (or one of the reasons) that she didn't agree with her was that she didn't consider the Bible to be factual. Though "not agreeing" and "not thinking the Bible is fact" are two different things, the construction of Jamie's statement leads me to believe that the latter is a more specific explanation of the former.

⁹⁴ This implication is consistent with Christian students' perceptions that instructors' reactions to religious discourses are motivated by their personal experiences with religion or feelings about Christianity/Christians (see Chapter 4).

It was very frustrating, the whole process, but it was- I thought it was really good because that's the first time I've ever actually had to revise a paper so much, and so I think it really improved my writing . . . I was happy with it once it was done.

Jamie's process of writing and revising her paper is illustrative of how Christian students may be unaware of the ways in which their attempts to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing fall short of instructors' expectations. In this case, Jamie aimed to do the same kinds of work she saw in the assigned, published text she'd read for the course; that text quoted the Bible and made claims based on an interpretation of those quotations. What she missed, as she considered her own work, was the other forms of evidence provided in the assigned text, and—one can presume—the ways in which that text negotiated audience.

This example also highlights how tricky it can be for an instructor to communicate these kinds of issues to a religiously committed student—even one as seemingly open to feedback as Jamie was. Instructors run the risk of appearing critical of students' beliefs, rather than students' writing, and—as evidenced in some of Jamie's reflections—instructors' comments may be interpreted as motivated by their own beliefs, rather than their pedagogical expertise.

Implications

Miriam Diamond and Christina Copre argue that “[r]eligion in the secular classroom is a hot topic on today's campuses, one that is becoming increasingly consequential” (xv), and both student and instructor participants in this study seem to concur with Diamond and Copre's assertion. Other scholars claim that religion has become too significant a cultural factor to dismiss (Edwards 28; Fish C1; Griffith B6) and that students are increasingly interested in discussing and exploring spirituality (Kuh and Gonyea 47; Thomas and Bahr 6; Walvoord A22). Despite students' desire to explore and discuss religious issues, however, they seem not to have many opportunities to do so (Diamond and Copre xvi). The students surveyed and interviewed for this study do express a kind of frustration, or feeling of repression, regarding their freedom to explore

religious beliefs in an academic context. They seem anxious for opportunities to examine this “hot topic” with their peers, with their professors, and through their writing.

The data collected from Christian students at UM suggests that these students are looking to writing courses as places where they might think through and articulate what they believe and why. Many of them see writing as a form of self-expression, an act inescapably linked to identity, and they seem enthusiastic about writing that allows them to explore a core dimension of how they define themselves.

Their enthusiasm is tempered by feelings of uncertainty about how others (and faculty in particular) will respond to the introduction of religious discourses into the classroom. Students’ relationship with their instructors and their sense of how their work will be evaluated seem to be the primary factors in decision-making about if and how to incorporate religious discourses into academic writing. Though some students seem willing to write without much concern for a potentially negative instructor reaction or evaluation, many worry about how their beliefs might clash with the instructor’s, how the instructor’s opinion of them might change based on expressed religious beliefs, and how their grade might be affected by their choice.

What this means for Christian students is that their sense of what writing is, and what writing is for, may be in conflict with what they actually do in their composition courses. If Christian students, as Rogers and Love found, “could not envision learning without Jesus at the center” (55), the conflict becomes even more significant, as the students’ sense of purpose for higher education in general seems to clash with course expectations.

Students’ and instructors’ definitions of the work of composition contribute to the contentious relationship between the discourses of Christianity and composition. Students and instructors enter the classroom with different assumptions about the purposes of the writing to be done there, and the best ways to achieve those purposes. As noted in Chapter 5, definitions reflect the ideology and interests of the definer (Schiappa), which means that definitions are powerful, and not always easy to change.

There are, however, important points of overlap in students’ and instructors’ definitions as well. Though the overlap is generally in terms of ideal (what writing should be/do) rather than execution (how a writer achieves the ideal; what the end

product looks like), these points of overlap are significant because they may provide opportunities for improved communication between students and instructors.

For example, both students and instructors hold up composition courses as (ideally) “safe” spaces, in which students are comfortable sharing their values and ideas. Isabelle, Grant, and Theresa all highlight the importance of instructors creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere, and this resonates with instructors’ assertions that the writing classroom should be a “safe” space in which students from various groups can feel accepted and free to speak. The key difference, of course, is that instructors and students are thinking about safety in relation to different things/people. While instructors sometimes focus on the safety of groups that have been historically marginalized—and worry that religious discourses may cause these groups discomfort—Christian students focus on the protection of religious identity and discourses. What neither group gives much attention to, however, is the complicated relationship of safety to issues of power, or to the kinds of critical thinking and questioning that students are expected to do in their courses. Instructors uphold “safe” classrooms as an ideal, seemingly without much consideration for how “unsafe” interrogating their assumptions or critiquing their ways of thinking may be or feel for students. Students, on the other hand, discuss safety without indicating how a “safe” place for religious discourses may create an unsafe place for other discourses, and how the power dynamics around Christian discourses make safety a very complex issue.

Connected to the issue of safety is the issue of identity. Both students and instructors recognize identity as an inevitable part of students’ work in the composition course, and as a complicating factor in creating safe classrooms. While instructors note the connection between identity and writing—and a few argue specifically for the recognition of religious identity as a part of academic work—others tend to discuss Christian identity as an obstacle to the kinds of work they expect in the composition course, rather than a vehicle for or intrinsic part of that work. Though certain instructors have a tendency to position Christian identity as separate from academic work, and some scholars warn of the dangers of such positioning (Bronwyn, “Book”; Vander Lei), instructors as a group appear much less focused on identity as a key element of students’ work in the writing course than students are. Nevertheless, identity offers another point

of departure for students and instructors, because a joint discussion of identity's relationship to writing may lead to mutually constructed definitions of what it means to write, and how identity factors into that work.

Finally, both students and instructors address critical thinking as a dimension of academic writing, though students raise the issue less often than instructors. Both groups point to the importance of students thinking critically about their beliefs and learning how to communicate their ideas in an academic context. Where they differ is in their descriptions of how critical thinking is best developed. Christian students tend to see active encouragement of and engagement with students' beliefs in the writing course as the best way to do the work of composition, while instructors are sometimes wary of the potential for religious discourses to work against students' critical thinking. This is perhaps the most troubled of the three "connections"—as the definition of critical thinking itself is contested, even among writing instructors and scholars—but students and instructors might exploit their common sense that academic writing is meant to challenge students as thinkers in order to develop a more cohesive sense of how that work might be done.

Chapter Seven

“EQUALLY PRESENT AND COMPELLING REALITIES”: TOWARD CONVERSATION BETWEEN AND ABOUT COMPETING DISCOURSES

The previous chapters have shown how writing instructors and Christian students at the University of the Midwest talk about one another, about themselves in relation to the other group, and about how religious discourses fit (or do not fit) into the work of a composition course. The discourses of Christianity and composition can offer competing views of the practices and purposes of writing in a public university setting, and often leave instructors and students struggling to communicate effectively about the challenges that religious discourses bring to composition courses. In this final chapter, I discuss my major findings, as well as some of the important questions they raise. Though I believe that these competing discourses need not exist strictly as rivals in the classroom—that they can, as Colin would say, exist as “equally present and compelling realities”—and I think that there are spaces for mutual understanding within and across these discourses, there is much more work to be done before composition scholars, instructors, and students can conceptualize and construct such spaces.

In this chapter, I first discuss how this study contributes to the field of composition studies. Then I move to a discussion of my key findings, synthesizing the major results of my data analysis and outlining four suggestions for scholars and instructors that grow out of these findings. I then present a series of questions that are raised by my study that I believe are key to future composition scholarship on religious discourses. Finally, I present two examples from contemporary composition scholarship that demonstrate how scholars might conceptualize productive conversations around religious discourses. Throughout the chapter, I highlight conversation as a means of addressing the tensions between competing discourses.

Contributions to the Field

As stated in my opening chapter, there are several ways in which I believe my study of the often-competing discourses of Christianity and composition contributes to the field of composition studies. First, this study adds to a small but developing body of work on religion in composition scholarship. There is a growing acknowledgement of the lack of scholarly attention to religious discourses and identity (Gere in Brandt, et al.; Swearingen; Wallace) and of the importance of this scholarship to compositionists (Daniell, “Composing”; Dively; Perkins; Vander Lei and Kyburz). My work is meant to address the issue of religious discourses in ways that are particularly relevant to the interests of composition scholars and instructors.

Second, this study includes voices that are not often present in composition scholarship. The instructor participants, for example, are graduate students and lecturers, many of whom are not publishing as compositionists and who do not necessarily identify with the field. Their perspectives are important, because at most large, public universities in the United States, these are the people teaching a majority of the composition courses.

My study also contributes the voices of those who are rarely allowed to speak for themselves in composition scholarship—Christian students. Though Christian students are sometimes quoted or paraphrased in articles about how their beliefs affect the writing classroom, their words, actions, and writing are almost always filtered through the perspective of their instructors. This dissertation incorporates Christian students’ own descriptions of their writing, their instructors, their positions in the classroom and on campus, as well as their thoughts on how religious discourses fit into academic writing. Hearing these voices is crucial to any attempt to understand this student population, to work with them productively on their writing, and to develop pedagogies that effectively respond to the presence of religious discourses in the writing classroom. It is crucial because hearing from these students makes it more difficult to stereotype or dismiss them, and it contributes to the development of more nuanced perspectives on the discourses they bring to the classroom.

Third, this research puts Christian students’ and composition instructors’ voices in conversation with one another regarding the role of religious discourses in the writing

classroom—particularly regarding how members of each group define the purposes and/or work of composition courses. This “conversation” provides insight into some of the challenges that these groups face as they interact with one another.

Finally, this study is a hybrid genre, blending analysis of composition scholarship with analysis of qualitative data throughout each chapter. My project, though not especially large as qualitative studies go, brings together the voices of more than 80 individuals, which allows for the identification of important patterns of response, and allows for a kind of description not possible with a narrower focus. This is not to say that my findings are broadly generalizable, but it does mean that I have added one rich data set to the field that will potentially be useful to other scholars and instructors, and that expands the discussion around religious discourses in the classroom.

Major Findings

There are three major sets of findings from this study that seem particularly relevant to the field of composition studies. The first concerns instructors’ perceptions of Christian students. As discussed in Chapter 3, how instructors tend to think and talk about Christian students reveal ways in which these students can seem problematic, how students’ discourses affect their instructors, and how instructors themselves reflect (or do not reflect) on their own responses to Christian students. The data shows that there is no consensus among instructors (at least at UM) about what Christian students are like and how they should be dealt with, but there is evidence that these students cause some anxiety and frustration for many instructors. My study reveals instructors struggling with their pedagogy and, at times, questioning their own responses to a particular group of students. If instructors’ uncertainty about (and sometimes negative perceptions of) Christian students are communicated directly or indirectly to those students, it has the potential to adversely affect student-instructor communication and limit the effectiveness of instructors’ feedback on the students’ written work.

Christian students’ perceptions—of their place on campus, of their instructors, of themselves through instructors’ eyes—are also significant. As discussed in Chapter 4, Christian students often struggle to find their place in a university setting that at times

feels threatening to them, both socially and academically. Though student responses were varied, the data reveals that a majority of Christian student participants at least *expected* some form of negative reaction/response because of their religious beliefs. Like other groups who face stereotyping and who expect certain kinds of discrimination, Christian students must choose how to negotiate their religious identities in contexts that may not seem open to them.

These student struggles are important for composition scholars and instructors to be aware of, because some Christian students report practicing risk-averse behaviors (e.g., avoiding topics with which their instructors may disagree; choosing not to disclose their religious beliefs; striving to be “neutral” in their work) in their writing courses for fear of being judged or discriminated against as a Christian. Christian students at UM sometimes assume that to identify as Christian is to invite doubts or preconceived notions from instructors and classmates about their intellectual abilities, their political views, and their open-mindedness. Although these assumptions may not be accurate in all cases, they are grounded in the lived experience of some Christian students, and they can influence student-instructor relationships and classroom dynamics in composition courses.

Third, my research indicates that instructors and Christian students often have competing definitions of the work of composition and the purposes of academic writing. As discussed in Chapter 5, instructors seem to view the composition classroom as a place where marginalized voices can be heard, where students feel safe to express themselves, and where students are challenged to question their ideas and beliefs. Instructors expect students to make rhetorical decisions based on their audience, to learn how to manage personal beliefs and evidence in academically appropriate ways, and to reflect critically on their own ways of thinking.

The data collected from Christian students (addressed in Chapter 6) suggests that these students envision the writing course as a place where they might think through and articulate what they believe and why. Some of these students see writing as a form of self-expression—and inescapably linked to identity—and seem excited about writing and writing assignments that allow them to explore aspects of how they define themselves. Students also see ways in which religious discourses can be an effective part of academic

writing, most notably for how it can help the reader understand the writer's perspective. Though students also emphasize safety as an important part of their writing courses, they do not tend to focus on critiquing their own beliefs, or on how that critique might affect their feeling of safety.

Students' and instructors' conflicting definitions of the work of composition can contribute to the contentious relationship between the discourses of Christianity and the discourses of composition. It's helpful for those in the field to acknowledge these discrepancies and to recognize that the work of writing courses may be hampered if the instructor and the students have differing ideas of why they are there and what they are hoping to accomplish. At the same time, there are points of overlap in these definitions (see Chapter 6) that hold out potential for fruitful conversations. Students and instructors envision composition courses as (ideally) "safe" spaces for students to share their values and ideas. Both groups recognize identity as an inevitable aspect of students' work in the course, and as a complicating factor in creating safe classrooms. Though these are complex and difficult topics to consider, they may be starting points for students and instructors to begin developing co-articulated descriptions of the work of the writing course.

These findings highlight some of the tensions and complications that the competing discourses of Christianity and composition bring to the writing classroom. By pinpointing and describing several specific *sources* of tension and complication, this study offers scholars some stepping stones toward a clearer and more nuanced understanding of how these competing discourses operate and how they might be put in productive conversation. In the following section, I suggest several questions that might be taken up in future scholarship in this area.

Questions for Future Research

As I have noted at several points in this study, the field of composition studies is just beginning to take on questions of religious discourses and identities as they relate to

the writing classroom. My research adds to the developing body of work in this area, but there is much work yet to be done. This section is organized around a series of questions raised by my research. For each question, I have offered the ways in which my study touches upon these issues, while acknowledging the fact that these are questions which will require many voices and much more work if they are to be engaged rigorously and productively.

What Are Some of the Obstacles to Communication between Christian Students and Writing Instructors?

My findings suggest that there are multiple factors shaping student and instructor dynamics around religious discourses in the writing classroom. It seems—from instructor and student data as well as from composition scholarship—that certain of these factors become obstacles to effective communication, sometimes shutting down possibilities for conversation between competing discourses. It is important to be aware of such obstacles, and to address them in future research, if they are to be transformed from obstacles to opportunities for productive conversation.

I focus on two particular obstacles here—student and instructor assumptions about each other, and conflicting views of how religious discourses can/can't be used in academic writing—because they emerged from my data and because my research has provided an initial, provisional way of discussing and addressing these obstacles. Both of these obstacles are complex and significant, warranting further study into how they affect composition courses.

Instructors' and students' assumptions about each other can interfere with attempts to address the competing discourses of Christianity and composition. If, for example, Christian students enter the classroom assuming that instructors are hostile to their faith and that instructors may look down on them for expressing religious beliefs, they may feel intimidated or defensive as they try to articulate themselves. Their ability to interpret constructive feedback for what it is may be hampered by suspicion, fear, or anger. In Chapter 4, I noted that students sometimes expect negative reactions from their instructors. A student who assumes that their instructor thinks that Christians are “ignorant” or even “delusional” might interpret any criticism of the ways they've drawn

from faith in their writing as an attack, or as an indication of the instructor's assessment of their academic ability. Students may expect to have their religious discourses excluded (or may self-impose exclusion) based on their encounters with instructors, what they have been told, and what they assume is expected of them, and this can influence their willingness or ability to engage in conversations about how religious discourses affect their work.

Similarly, if instructors tend to think of Christian students as naïve, intolerant, resistant to critical thinking, or unwilling to consider alternative perspectives, conversations with these students regarding religious discourses are potentially compromised before interactions with particular students even occur. For example, Adrienne's doubts about the intellectual capabilities of her Christian students incline her to avoid "religious" conversations altogether, but one can imagine how her assumption influences the ways that she engages in such conversations when the issue is somehow forced.⁹⁵ And if some instructors believe, as one surveyed instructor seems to, that it may not even be "fair" to ask these students to adhere to certain academic norms, then the ways that instructors talk to them about their work may be shaped by the students' presumed limitations. It stands to reason that a speaker will address differently individuals whom she hopes to persuade or teach than those she assumes cannot be taught or cannot learn.

More broadly, disciplinary assumptions about Christianity and/or Christian students may be shaping the ways in which composition instructors think and talk about religious discourses, and how they engage, or do not engage, in conversation with religious students. For example, if compositionists think of Christian students as those who will argue for their beliefs but not reflect on them, they are operating within a discursive framework that casts these students as specifically problematic—as a group whose members resist critical thinking (Perkins 605). From this perspective, religious discourses and the discourses of composition studies may appear to be mutually exclusive.

⁹⁵ Adrienne's interview shows that she cannot always avoid these conversations. See Chapter 3 for a specific example of a difficult encounter with a Christian student who had used religious discourse in a paper for her class.

Composition scholarship has been engaged for some time in critical reflection on particular student groups and how the role of certain students in the writing classroom is influenced by both student and instructor assumptions (e.g., Borkowski; Canagarajah, “Toward”; Delpit, *Other*; LeCourt; Logan; Williams, “Speak”; Young). However, Christian and other religious students are underrepresented in this scholarship, particularly in terms of how assumptions around these students influence theory and pedagogy. Further study is needed in order to challenge assumptions carried by both instructors and students, and to conceptualize pedagogical models or strategies that allow for productive engagement with students’ religious discourses.

Another hindrance to instructors and Christian students communicating effectively is students’ and instructors’ tendency to construct the goals of writing in different ways. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, students and instructors often have differing conceptions of what the composition course is meant to do, and what the writing done in that course is for. If students view writing primarily as a means of “self-expression,” for example, they will approach conversations about that writing very differently than will an instructor who views writing as a means of engaging in inquiry.

Students sometimes struggle with the sense that their religious beliefs—often so integral to their sense of self—are not to be considered a legitimate part of their academic writing. For these students, religious discourses do not seem to run counter to intellectual or academic ones, and in fact may be viewed as integral to effective writing. When they are told—directly or indirectly—to leave religious discourses out of their work, Christian students sometimes interpret these directives as stemming from discrimination against Christianity (or religion in general) or from an instructor’s allegiance to a different belief system.

Students who understand religious discourses to be appropriate for academic writing may have a hard time understanding an instructor who holds serious reservations about the role of religious discourses in academic work. This may be part of the reason that instructors sometimes struggle to find ways to talk to students whose writing uses religious discourses in ways they deem inappropriate. As one instructor puts it, “it is difficult to explain to the student that the grade reflects a lack of warrants for her claim rather than a bias against the claim itself, which is based in the dogma of the religion. It’s

a tricky balance. A hot spot.” Instructors like this one seem cognizant of how risky conversations about students’ religious discourses can be, particularly in making distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate ways of incorporating these discourses into writing.

On the other hand, instructors who think that religious discourses have no place (or almost always have no place) in academic work—because they appear antithetical to the academic goals of critical thinking, tolerance, and willingness to consider alternative perspectives, or because they undermine the purposes of academic writing—are unlikely to engage in this kind of conversation at all. As noted in Chapters 3 and 5, some instructors see no apparent benefit to such engagement, and some may even feel that avoiding discussion of religious discourses is ultimately in students’ best interest.

Instructors also face students who don’t seem to “get it” when they do engage in conversation about religious discourses and academic writing. As Adrienne puts it in her discussion of a student’s resistance to her feedback, instructors can feel like they are “speaking a different language” than their Christian students. As has been noted by a number of participants in this study (and addressed in Chapter 5), as well as by composition scholars (e.g. Berthoff, Daniell, Gere, Moffett, Swearingen, Vander Lei), there does not yet seem to be a language with which students and instructors can address issues of religious identity and discourses in writing. Anne Ruggles Gere, for example, writes, “Because discussions of religion have been essentially off-limits in higher education, we have failed to develop sophisticated and nuanced theoretical discourses to articulate spirituality” (in Brandt, et al. 46). I would add to this sentiment that compositionists have also failed to develop discourses with which to *respond* to the limited articulations of spirituality that are already circulating in scholarship, and that students bring to their work in writing courses.

What Does a Focus on Discourses Allow Researchers to Do?

This study explores some of the competing discourses of Christianity and composition operating in college composition courses, and identifies some of the implications of these competing discourses. My research is motivated by the belief that

exploring relationships between Christian discourses and the discourses of composition—even at just one local-institutional site—carries significant implications for students’ participation in coursework, for instructors’ pedagogy, and for future composition studies scholarship related to religious discourses and their place in the university writing classroom. This careful attention to discourses provides insight into the diverse ways of knowing, valuing, and communicating that students and instructors are bringing into the composition classroom.

Attention to discourses is important for composition scholars and instructors as they consider these multiple ways of knowing and communicating that factor into writing and the teaching of writing. As Lee Odell argued nearly thirty years ago, “We must not only influence our students’ writing, but also help refine and shape the discourse theory that will guide our work with students. In addition to being teachers, we should also function as discourse theorists and researchers” (84).

I agree with Odell that there is much to be gained from compositionists studying discourses. Working from James Gee’s conceptualization of discourses as “ways of being in the world” and as “forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities” (*Introduction* 526) allowed me to analyze student and instructor responses to survey and interview questions with an eye for what these responses revealed about how participants were valuing certain practices over others, how their beliefs helped to shape their perspectives on writing as well as their views of others, and how encounters with discourses that challenged their view of the world affected them—both positively and negatively. Studying discourses allows for the recognition of patterns that can inform scholarly perspectives on pedagogy, on what it means to write, and on the definitions and purposes of academic writing.

A focus on discourses also draws attention to the ways in which students are expected to take on particular ways of knowing and reasoning in their composition courses. As Bronwyn Williams writes:

Teachers expect students to recognize their authority through the adoption of the culture and values of the institution. As Lynn Bloom points out, part of the ideological agenda of the first-year composition course is to introduce and indoctrinate new students into the values privileged by the institution. . . . At the same time, the course is expected to help them overcome the cultural and

discursive beliefs and habits that are unacceptable to the mainstream of the academy (“Speak” 590).

Williams directs attention to the significance of discourses as part of the composition course—specifically the potential conflicts between discourses that reflect the “culture and values of the institution” and students’ “discursive beliefs” that do not reflect that culture or those values. David Bartholomae highlights the role of discourse(s) in composition courses as well, noting:

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse . . . they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline (511).

Like Williams, Bartholomae recognizes discourses as a powerful, and complex, factor in students’ learning. Students are asked to adopt new discourses, and these discourses are often quite different from students’ more familiar ways of thinking, writing, and knowing. Attending to these various discourses—and to the ways that they sometimes conflict—can contribute to the development of pedagogies that help students cope with the discursive demands of writing in the college composition course.

A discursive approach also draws attention to voices or ways of knowing that may previously have gone unnoticed or that have been discussed without acknowledgement of their complexity (Coates; Delpit, “Politics”). By studying the discourses of members of particular groups, researchers can make these discourses more visible, and contribute to a more complex and nuanced sense of how various groups—and individuals within those groups—make sense of the world (Cairney and Ashton; Godley).

Such complexity works against oversimplified representations of discourse communities, and allows traditionally unheard voices to trouble stereotypes and challenge assumptions about how certain discourses operate in the writing classroom. My study, for example, incorporates the written and spoken language of forty-five Christian students; though this is a relatively small number as qualitative studies go, there is a wide range of opinion and motivation even within this subset of Christian students. The data reveals both positive and negative student experiences in writing courses, a diverse array of ideas about writing and writing instructors, and patterns of uncertainty

around how religious discourses fit into a public university setting as well as examples of outspokenness. Studying Christian student discourses opens up and complicates discussion around the “problems” that these students bring into their composition classrooms.

What Do Hybrid Studies Allow Researchers to Do?

As noted throughout this work, the hybrid nature of my study has allowed me to approach and study the competing discourses of Christianity and composition in a way that contributes new perspectives to the composition scholarship on students’ religious discourses. I believe that this hybrid form of study is important for grounding disciplinary conversations about religious discourses in the results of empirical research that includes a significant sample size *and* in the more anecdotal (and sometimes more deeply examined) experiences of instructors with individual students that are most often represented in scholarship. As such, I think that this dissertation provides one model for other researchers looking for ways to put composition scholarship in conversation with empirical data derived from a qualitative study.

This is not, of course, to dismiss the very critical, reflective work that some composition scholars have done based on their own experiences with students. As is evident throughout this study, these scholars have pushed my analysis of student and instructor data, and they have raised important questions that shaped the development of my research. I do, however, think that there is a need for other kinds of empirical scholarship in composition studies regarding questions of religious discourses.

The kind of empirical research I am suggesting may also contribute more broadly to establishing scholarship about teaching as rigorous, significant research. Mariolina Salvatori, though she notes the importance of anecdotal work, argues that this kind of work alone—and particularly unreflexive use of the anecdotal—contributes to “the diminished status of teaching, and teaching of teaching, in English departments and elsewhere in the academy” (300). Salvatori claims that:

the scholarship of teaching needs to be consistently based on the same standards of professional accountability that govern more traditional scholarship in the field . . . It needs to present teaching as intellectual work—work that can be theorized,

work whose parameters and conditions of possibility can be analyzed as well as evaluated in accordance with formally articulated standards (304).

Scholarship that can be analyzed and evaluated “according to formally articulated standards” may be very beneficial to fostering new critical conversations about religious discourses. Findings from this kind of research are potentially generalizable (though not necessarily broadly, and certainly not universally) in a way that anecdotal research cannot be, especially once multiple scholars have conducted such research. Hybrid studies like this one can affirm and challenge the anecdotal scholarship, and add data sets to the field of composition studies that can be used to form claims and hypotheses, as well as to spark further inquiry.

Cultivating Conversation

My findings suggest at least four steps that composition scholars and instructors might take as initial movements toward fostering an atmosphere more conducive to conversations about Christian students’ discourses.⁹⁶ First, *scholars and instructors can resist assumptions about and stereotypes of Christianity and/or Christian students*. Concerns raised by both students and instructors—memories of professors’ mocking comments about Christians; students’ sense that instructors will see them as naïve or narrow-minded; Adrienne’s speculation that Christian students may not be capable of certain kinds of academic work—highlight how stereotypes function to reinforce tensions between Christian students and instructors and between competing discourses. As Diana Eck writes, “People ‘known’ through stereotypes do not have the opportunity to tell us who they are. We do not let them get close enough to speak for themselves. We define them in their absence, on the basis of images already present in our minds” (300). For conversation between competing discourses to be a possibility, students and instructors have to get “close enough” to speak for themselves and to hear someone else, and this is

⁹⁶ I believe that these steps are available to and useful for students as well (though of course their shifts in mindset would entail resisting assumptions about instructors, academic discourses, and ideas that challenge their beliefs). I focus on scholars and instructors here because this study is directed primarily to them, and seeks to inform composition scholarship and pedagogy. These steps could potentially be integrated into classroom practice in order to share them with students.

significantly more difficult if they are clinging to stereotypes that keep the others at a distance.

Second, in an act connected to resisting stereotypes, *scholars and instructors can begin to revise the “deficit” perspective on religious identity and discourses*. There is a tendency—apparent both explicitly and more subtly in the instructor data and in scholarship—to view religious identities from a “deficit” perspective, and this perspective leads to the construction of religious students as hindered in their academic work as a result of their religious commitments. This same deficit perspective appears in scholarship. As Amy Goodburn notes, “when students’ religious identities are discussed within the literature of critical pedagogy, it is usually described negatively, oftentimes as an impediment to be overcome” (333). Seen this way, religious identities and discourses have nothing to offer composition courses; rather, they are limitations that students and teachers must work against.

The deficit perspective on religious identity can lead to overly broad descriptions of religious students, casting them as a homogenous, problematic group. As Karen Kopelson points out, “monolithic constructions of our students as hopelessly ‘flawed’ are both inaccurate and unfair,” and they leave teachers with an impoverished understanding of their students’ needs and abilities (119). Monolithic constructions enable the positioning of religious students as “other,” and this othering limits teachers’ ability to shape their pedagogy toward productive engagement with students’ religious discourses. Rhonda Leathers Dively labels it an “injustice” and a form of “discrimination” to homogenize religious students as those “who maintain a very narrow and thus inferior perspective on the world” (92).⁹⁷ Moving from a deficit to a normative perspective on

⁹⁷ Even as she critiques this construction of religious students, however, Dively uses language that reinforces the deficit perspective on religious belief/discourse. Throughout her essay, she advocates “decentering” these students (94); “helping religious students break free” from their simplistic ways of thinking (96); “moving” students toward a different developmental stage (94); helping students “look beyond the blinders” of their ideology (96); and teaching students to recognize that the “‘easy answers’ provided by those beliefs systems are not adequate for addressing the complexities of human existence” (97). Though these pedagogical goals are rooted in a desire for students to think critically about their own belief systems, the cumulative effect here is to cast religious students as those who are being held back by their beliefs, and who need to be enlightened by their instructor—especially given the absence of any discussion of what these students might contribute to discussions of belief, or of the instructor’s (or other students’) need to question their own ideological assumptions.

religious identity and discourses is a dramatic shift, but I believe that continued study and discussion of religious discourses in composition can initiate and propel that shift.

Third, *scholars and instructors can watch for and resist the “us vs. them” narratives* around Christianity and composition/academe when they are constructed in scholarship, media, and informal interactions. These narratives are visible in Gina’s recollection of another instructor’s disappointment at having “Christ-ers” in their classroom, in Grant’s use of persecuted Christians in China to describe his experience as a student at UM, as well as in texts that reinforce a sense of Christian students as the “other” in some way. Maurice Charland argues that while people are interpellated into various narratives, and these narratives are very powerful, people still have agency to resist them, choosing not to recognize themselves in the narratives (142). Resisting “us vs. them” narratives is crucial because these narratives perpetuate and normalize the idea of rigid separation and intractable positions. Gerald Graff writes that “the gulf between academic and student culture can only be closed by starting respectfully from where students already are” (277). “Starting respectfully” requires seeing students and their discourses not as problems to be overcome but as vital parts of a vibrant and challenging academic community.

Fourth, *scholars and instructors can acknowledge the ideological nature of all discourses*, thereby resisting potential impulses to cast Christian discourses as *particularly* influenced by ideology or to cast Christian students as particularly resistant to ideas that challenge those discourses. For example, when instructors talk about Christian students having difficulty considering alternative perspectives or thinking critically about their beliefs, they might practice being conscious of their own difficulty with discourses that challenge their beliefs. This is not to equate instructors’ challenges with students’; they may be quite different. However, acknowledging the ideological nature of their own discourses and the ways in which they are committed to certain ideological perspectives may give instructors ways of understanding and empathizing with Christian students that lead to a mutual exploration of the “equally present and compelling realities” operating in the course.⁹⁸ Such acknowledgement can also model

⁹⁸ It is important to note that some instructors are already doing this kind of work. Nadia, for example, reflects multiple times on the dominant ideologies she sees circulating in the English department at UM,

for students the kinds of work that instructors often want them to do in relation to their own beliefs.

Keeping the Conversation Going

Discussing religious discourses is not easy. Discussing them respectfully and productively in light of the challenges they bring to the writing classroom is even more difficult. As Stanley Fish puts it, “it is one thing to take religion as an object of study and another to take religion seriously” (C1). And I *am* proposing that composition scholars take religion (and religious discourses) seriously—not as that which they must adopt or admire, but as factors that shape religiously-committed students’ views of themselves, of their writing, and of their courses. I also propose that compositionists stay open to the possibility that these factors aren’t always negative.

These are not simple propositions, and I want to acknowledge not only their complexity, but also the fact that this study is only an initial step in considering how changing views of religious discourses might play out in scholarly conversations and in the classroom. I do, however, have reasons to be hopeful about the possibility of approaching religious discourses seriously and respectfully, both in scholarship and in pedagogy.

Priscilla Perkins, for example, privileges thoughtful communication over argument as she discusses her encounters with Christian students. She writes, “the task [she] shared with [her] students had much more to do with understanding than persuasion” (591). Though trying to understand each other might seem an obvious step for students and instructors struggling with religious discourses in the classroom, it may actually be a significant shift in mindset, especially given the centrality of argument to many composition courses. Perkins reminds us that there can be room for understanding amongst competing discourses, and that an important part of making that room is to conceptualize understanding as a “task” that can be taken on by students and instructors.

and though she aligns herself with these ideologies, she considers how they affect instructors’ reading and evaluation of student writing that doesn’t match them. She seems highly aware that “[e]very social circle or milieu is distinguishable in terms of its dominant opinions and unquestioned beliefs, of the premises that it takes for granted without hesitation” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 20).

Jonathan S. Cullick's recently published reader *Religion in the 21st Century* (Longman) makes room for religious discourses in the writing classroom in a different way. The book, intended to give teachers "a tool for classroom discussions and writing assignments that explore how language determines and shapes the ways we engage with faith," is divided into religious writing by categories: Religion in Personal Writing; Religion in Sacred Writing; Religion in Academic Writing; Religion in Public Issues; Religion in Expository Writing (xiii). These categories ask students to think specifically about the connection of religious beliefs to different kinds of writing, and each essay is followed by "Questions about Rhetorical Analysis." Cullick's text offers composition instructors a way to initiate conversation with students about how religious discourses might be brought into the classroom (and into their writing) in rhetorically effective ways.

For example, following an essay entitled "Physics and Grief," in which the author, Patricia Monaghan, struggles to find meaning following the death of her husband, a series of "Questions for Rhetorical Analysis" ask students to contemplate the choices the author makes about narrative, structure, and audience.⁹⁹ These questions ask students to consider audience awareness—an issue that many instructors pointed to as a problem for Christian students—and to identify how aspects of the essay reveal the author's intended audience. Such practice is foundational work for students to be able to make choices about their own audiences, and to reflect upon how their writing does or does not reach that audience effectively.

I point to Perkins and Cullick here to draw attention to the fact that scholarship and conversation about religious discourses and their relationship to the composition classroom are already circulating. I have aimed, with my research, to add new data and findings to that scholarship, and to add new voices—my own and the study participants'—to that conversation.

⁹⁹ Among the questions are: "Who seems to be the reader Monaghan has in mind: A scientist? Someone who has lost a loved one? A deeply religious person? What traits do you find in her story to suggest who her intended reader is?" (28).

Final Thoughts

It's apparent from scholarship and from my research results that Christian students can raise unique challenges for writing instructors. This study has allowed me to look more closely at some of those challenges—as articulated by both students and instructors—and to analyze competing discourses of Christianity and composition that contribute to those challenges.

I have found that there are, indeed, significant points of conflict between student and instructor discourses, and that instructors and Christian students sometimes face tremendous difficulty as they try to communicate with one another. There are, however, points of overlap between these discourses as well, and there may be opportunities for students and instructors to articulate—for themselves and to each other—how they are thinking about academic writing, about religious discourses as part of that writing, and about the purposes of the composition course. There is also an opportunity for composition scholars to pick up on both the difficulties and points of overlap identified in my study in their own research as a way to spark future conversation about—and to develop a better understanding of—how Christian students and religious discourses operate in the writing classroom.

Through conversation, students and instructors may find ways of moving beyond mutual frustration toward co-constructed articulations of what academic writing is for. There need not be agreement about the meaning of life or the existence of God; there need only be an atmosphere in which competing discourses can encounter one another in ways that promote conversation rather than standoffs.

Appendices

APPENDIX A
SAMPLE STUDENT SURVEYS
(originals were handwritten)

Survey #1

What composition courses have you taken (or are you currently taking) at UM (English 124, 125, 225, 229, 325)?

124, 225

How do you think writing instructors think about Christian students? What gives you this impression?

Confused, perhaps. I heard a lot of caution from my professors.

Did you identify as Christian in your writing course(s)? Why or why not?

Yes, one of my papers used the bible as a comparison. The other class was creative writing and Christianity is something I struggle with from a creative standpoint.

How did you identify yourself, if you did? (in your writing, during class discussion, during office hours with your instructor, etc.)

*student circled “in your writing” and “during office hours”

What kinds of responses, if any, did your Christian identity elicit from your instructor?

Well, caution that I should avoid being cliché or dogmatic in my writing.

Do you think that it's appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing?

Yes, it's an ideology like any other that comes into play

Have you ever written a paper for a college writing course about your faith or from a Christian perspective? If so, how was that choice received by the instructor?

It was received well, I think.

Survey #2

What composition courses have you taken (or are you currently taking) at UM (English 124, 125, 225, 229, 325)?

English 125

How do you think writing instructors think about Christian students? What gives you this impression?

maybe sheltered, opinionated, wrong, don't really know what they are talking about, ignorant

Did you identify as Christian in your writing course(s)? Why or why not?

Yes but didn't really talk about it much

How did you identify yourself, if you did? (in your writing, during class discussion, during office hours with your instructor, etc.)

In my papers

What kinds of responses, if any, did your Christian identity elicit from your instructor?

Not much of a response. Definitely felt some tension though.

Do you think that it's appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing?

Yes! It should be talked about a lot more.

Have you ever written a paper for a college writing course about your faith or from a Christian perspective? If so, how was that choice received by the instructor?

I've only mentioned my beliefs in papers not really talked about them at length.

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE INSTRUCTOR SURVEYS
(originals were handwritten)

Survey #3

Are you a GSI or a lecturer?

GSI

Which courses have you taught at UM?

125

How long have you been teaching composition?

1 yr.

What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Christian student?

sometimes close-minded & opinionated; thoughtful; sometimes judgmental

Have you ever had a self-identified Christian student in one of your writing courses? If so, what do you recall about that student and their work?

Yes. She wrote about infant euthanasia & tied it to the abortion debate. B/c of her religious beliefs she had a hard time creating an effective argument w/in academia. She also wrote journals that expressed intolerance towards homosexuals & I felt uncomfortable responding to it.

Have you ever had a problem or conflict with a Christian student that involved that student's religious belief system? Please describe this experience.

Just that it was hard to get the student to move beyond making arguments with God & morality as the only evidence. I also don't know how to challenge some Christian students to be more critical thinkers without entering into religious conversations.

Have you ever had a Christian student incorporate their faith into their writing for the course? If so, what was the result?

The result was ineffective writing for a secular audience. The student was unwilling to explore the other side of the issue in order to address counterarguments effectively & provided evidence/support that would only be convincing to someone w/similar religious beliefs.

Do you think that it is appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing? Please explain.

As a student, I think it is appropriate as long as it is not relied on as fact/evidence. I don't think it is as appropriate for academics, but I'm not sure why. I guess it seems like religion is only acceptable as a belief system & that isn't relevant to academic arguments.

Survey #4

Are you a GSI or a lecturer?

lecturer

Which courses have you taught at UM?

Eng. 125, Eng. 124., Eng. 223

How long have you been teaching composition?

Between different positions, about three years.

What characteristics come to mind when you think of a Christian student?

I try not to expect anything from any student until work is underway. However, I suppose my personal biases are that Christian students are: 1) diligent students, 2) perhaps not as open thinkers as others, and 3) more likely to be offended by controversial materials.

Have you ever had a self-identified Christian student in one of your writing courses? If so, what do you recall about that student and their work?

Yes – a couple of times. I didn't know the students were Christian until it came up in their writing. The three times I recall this happening, the students were dedicated students. Their writing skills were average.

Have you ever had a problem or conflict with a Christian student that involved that student's religious belief system? Please describe this experience.

I wouldn't characterize any of my experiences as problems or conflicts. It's come up with assignments. See below.

Have you ever had a Christian student incorporate their faith into their writing for the course? If so, what was the result?

Yes – three times. Once it was a personal essay, which was an appropriate venue. The second time, it was a persuasive essay (on abortion), and I found it challenging to objectively grade something I disagreed with. The third time, it was a definition essay. Some of the content made me worry for the student (a description of abuse she had “forgiven”) but she worked within the requirements of the assignment – it was fine.

Do you think that it is appropriate to incorporate religious beliefs into academic writing? Please explain.

It depends entirely on the assignment. If you're asking a student to draw on personal belief, then it makes sense they should draw on religion as part of their beliefs. What gets challenging is how to teach logical argument while not challenging any deep-seated beliefs. Faith is often not something that can be broken down by logic.

APPENDIX C
SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: We should be – let me check –

Colin: Alright.

Interviewer: Ok. So, the first thing I'd like to ask is why you were interested in talking about this. When you filled out the survey, why did you decide to volunteer for an interview?

Colin: Ok. Well, the thing I was thinking about since then – and I guess the reason that I tell that story [an anecdote about a class he'd taught, told to me as we walked to his office for the interview] and the reason that that story fits for me is like- 'cause it's not like about Christianity necessarily but –

Interviewer: The story of the classroom that you had –

Colin: The classroom and the gender dynamics and ultimately it's sort of the way that this has been put into this idea of the culture wars. Um. To me, I think tolerance is the way to talk about it. Tolerance is the thing, and I think that it's ultimately unimportant who is "on top." I think that – I think that dominance is an overblown issue here. It's like on the one hand I agree that power's important, but I think in the larger scope of things that dominance is it's – 'cause you know one of the big things that we talk about when we're talking about – when we're being metacognitive about rhetoric, is that we're talking about power relationships, right? And to me dominance is itself is a result of perspective. That's just how I think about it, in that – I don't know.

Like I said, I'm not an expert in comp rhetoric, so the degree to which I say fits or does not fit – like I'm not aware necessarily the degree to which my own discourse is fitting in with a broader discourse. I just know that this is the way that I see it, and to the degree to which I've read and not read, whatever. That power and dominance, and that kind of stuff, is also sort of a result of perspective, and this is sort of what we talked about last time where you know out – when you're living on a farm in Kansas and you're watching television while you actually may represent 68% - like if you're white, Anglo Saxon, Protestant, sort of living in the middle of the country, watching NASCAR, and then watching

movies from Hollywood, and then your kid goes off to college, and all this stuff, you may – you are –

Well, on the one hand, you're technically 68%, you're technically representing a dominant position in the country. Um, from your perspective, you can still feel very alone, right? And so you may still operate like under totally different assumption about like power paradigms, you know? And that that's really what's coming into the classroom – and the same thing is happening in the classroom where the teacher may technically be the power in the classroom, right, and at the university, you know, it's even more than technically. You know, like the power in that circumstance, it can still point to statistics, right, and say we are still – you know, we are a faculty composed of all these different minorities and that the very – to be intellectual at all in the country is itself sort of a minority position to take, right. To be sort of a secular humanist.

Statistically as a minority position today, and so you're stuck in the exact same quandary, right, which is that the statistics are telling you one thing, but your own personal experience is telling you something very different. The statistics and also the power of relationships. Where like you may actually have authority over the kids in the class and the university actually has a place of prestige in society and a place of authority in society, and yet it can still feel threatened.

And so there's this interesting thing that happens in the classroom where both groups have claim to one kind of power, and – but both groups also feel as though they're coming from a place of weakness. And I think the problem that happens, you know, in the classroom, is that both sides are consciously or unconsciously being disingenuous about the complexity of the situation. You know, where they – you know, they choose to assert their power when it's convenient and then assert their victimhood when it's convenient, and then in both – and what I think is really frustrating in the classroom is – especially when we're talking about freshman comp, it's like that's the real focus. The students and the professors are both doing, right, but the professor should know better, and that I think is the key, and that's where tol – that's the whole thing of tolerance.

Tolerance is not – and let me – this is something that comes up – 'cause I teach – when I teach 124, I teach a book called *Gilead*. I don't know if you've read that book?

Interviewer:

Unh-uh.

Colin: I don't know if I keep a copy of it here. Do I – oh yeah. *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. Marilynne Robinson, true kick-ass writer of the last 20 years. She would not say that. She is a Congregationalist minister. (*Laughter*) But it's a great book. Won – by the national book award that year I think or the Pulitzer Prize. I don't remember which. She's written two novels. Both of them have won either the Pulitzer Prize or the National Book Award. At this instant I can't remember which one, but she won it both times. She wrote a novel in 1980, and then she came back two years ago and wrote that novel. Two novels, over 20 years, both of them considered the greatest novel of that year or one of the greatest novels of that year.

Interviewer: Wow.

Colin: And it's interesting 'cause her first novel is very clearly about femininity and paganism, and this is about a – you know, a Protestant preacher in the 1950's. You know, it's about fatherhood and all this stuff. But the main theme of the novel is about grace, and the problem of grace in Christianity. Like what is grace; what is the meaning, right.

Um. 'Cause the whole thing is it's this guy, John Ames III, who is the grandson of the original pastor of the town. The Congregationalist pastor of the town, and he has a friend who's the Presbyterian minister, who's – when Ames was a kid – was a young man, was in his 30's, he had a wife and a daughter, and he went off on some missionary work and he came back and his wife and daughter had both died.

And so then he was just left with nothing, and then his friend Boughton, who's the other minister in town, has a son and they name him for him. So it's John Ames Boughton is this kid, and it's weird – like the narrator – it's a weird curse 'cause like it all – it just reinforces that he has no children. That he's just sort of alone and that the only person out there that's carrying his name is this kid, and it turns out that this kid, John Ames Boughton, is this real terrible kid. Like he's always pulling pranks on people and doing these terrible things.

And then late in life, John Ames gets married again and has this little kid, but it's this weird situation where he's like 70, and he has this son and he's gonna die soon because he has this heart condition, and he doesn't know if it's any better than the last time.

Where he is just gonna be gone when they're growing up and he's gonna have died and –

Interviewer:

His son's gonna die or he's gonna die?

Colin:

He's gonna die. He's gonna die because he's old and pretty soon, and so – the whole story then is about how does he reconcile himself with this other son, who's in his 30's now. John Ames Boughten comes back – coming back seeking forgiveness, and – long story short, grace in the novel is really clearly defined as a recognition of oneself in the other, and that that – and implicit and what I find really fascinating is that God is able to forgive us because we are flawed and the way that he's – what grace really means is that he recognizes that he screwed up too. That the world is not perfect and that he made the world, and that when we screw up and he forgives us, he's forgiving us because he needs to be forgiven or that's how I read it anyways.

That's one particular notion of grace, right. That Christ is a man and that he's forgiving because we have all sinned, we all live in sin. This is obviously for Congregationalists, this is not necessarily doctrinally true for a lot of faiths, but I like the way that this book played out. It doesn't ever say that explicitly, but it's very much like everybody in the book, even John Ames, who is the pastor and who seems to be the most sort of unblemished and un-sinned man in the book, he also has these sort of ambiguous sins of omission. Things that he doesn't say, things that he doesn't do, that everybody had. As far – the more you push on him, the more you find these flaws, and all that is to be said.

One of the ways that we talk about it in class is this idea that tolerance isn't just about tolerating. It isn't just about putting up with, you know. That it's about humanism. It's about saying I am a person and this other person is a person, and setting aside all the big stuff. We've got that in common and that we have more in common as we think about it than we don't, and – the reason I like that, especially in terms of this conversation and what we're talking about, you know, is that's a very secular humanist virtue, right, to recognize our saneness in other people. To recognize ourselves in them and them in us, right, and that – but that it's also a Christian virtue, right. But it's a Christian virtue which is not –

The reciprocity of grace is an aspect of grace that doesn't get talked about a lot, but is – that's the part that is required to really understand how to – it's the way – again, if the thing is to see how we are like other people, the reason I like the book is because part

of what it does is it shows how secular humanists and Christians are actually very, very similar in the things that they prefer, but again they simply choose to not – to sort of emphasize their differences for power reasons.

And so in a classroom, to me when I'm talking to individual students or I'm talking to the whole class, that's to me, to define tolerance and define acceptance is really that. It's to say we aren't – there's so much that's tying us together and that when ever we get into a discussion with each other, we have to first recognize, you know, how we're coming from similar places and that we've only diverged in some small way. Because as long as we do that, as long as we're sort of held together by those similarities, we can never – we are guarded against or we're shielded against that urge to fully attack each other. To just let things totally fall and become uncivilized.

Interviewer:

Now, do you think that's where – so you said a little earlier when you were talking more about the power relations that you know both groups sort of make claims to power and weakness when it sort of benefits them. Do you think this area, in this notion of tolerance and how it could be used to make things, you know, more of a negotiation than an attack? Do you think that's one of the areas that – 'cause you said professor should know better, is that one of the areas that leads you to say that? That professor should – do you feel like professors should have a better understanding –

Colin:

Absolutely – I think it's incumbent on us –

Interviewer:

Tolerance –

Colin:

Yeah and not just the theory of tolerance, but to actually to put yourself in a position of tolerance and part of that, you know – there's sort of a lot of practical aspects of that, you know, is to rather – there's so many things where we just say I don't want to get into it, you know. I want to avoid it, and so we cut off aspects of conversation explicitly and implicitly, and all that does is reinforce those separations, right. So I'm in Campus Crusade for Christ. Am I now in this class where the professor says up front we're not going to talk about abortion, and just says it, and I take from that my subservient status in the class, right.

Which is not as though you have to talk about abortion in the class, but that you say we're not going to talk about abortion and it's not because it's not an important issue, and it's not because it's not an

interesting issue, but it's simply because I personally don't know how to deal with it. Don't know how to navigate that, and that it is such a big issue. You know, one of the things I would say about it, one of the things I sometimes say when it comes up, you know, is because I don't want to do a disservice to that debate, and that's the most important thing. Is that the debate be served honestly and fairly, and that's an important –

So if it's important to me that a debate be served honestly and fairly, and I don't know that I can navigate the debate that way; I would totally screw this up. And to just – to start off by admitting, as a teacher, my flaw, right, and to say, "I can't do this because I'm not yet equipped to do it, and I can do a lot of other things; we can talk about a lot of other issues." Just to put it that way, it no longer becomes we're not doing this because I have a secret reason and I secretly hate you or – and then people just read into that all kinds of things –

Interviewer: I don't want to hear your opinion on it if (*Cross Talk*) –

Colin: Right and again, you know – and we could talk about this in my office, you know. We can talk about it whenever you want to talk about it, but we're not going to do it in class just because I wouldn't be able to manage it correctly. And then you know, that's one example, but the key to that example again is this idea of saying I am flawed the way that you are flawed. Neither of us has the perfect answer to this so let's focus on the things we can fix and not worry about the things we can't, and that this shouldn't – so that it doesn't become a thing that separates us and it doesn't become a leverage point on either of our sides.

Interviewer: Where do you think you – 'cause I think that's really interesting and I think, you know, some people do handle that kind of thing and especially, you know, something like abortion or other things that involve, you know, medical and scientific information that a lot of people either teaching or in the classroom don't necessarily have access to that expertise or that information, which can make the debate reduced to something that doesn't really do it justice, but where do you – I guess – when you do that – 'cause one of the things I find hardest about that is once you decide there are certain things that we're not gonna talk about – and I think a lot of people do that and I think it's legitimate, but where do you decide where to draw the line? 'Cause you know part of it is if we want to deal with complex and difficult issues in the classroom. You know, I'm just kind of interested, where do you draw the line? What do you decide ok this is – because we're gonna be flawed with everything,

right. I mean there's nothing that I can discuss perfectly, you know.

Colin: Sure –

Interviewer: So I guess – I mean is it just a matter of understanding the degree to which you're unable to –

Colin: Well, I mean –

Interviewer: Something – 'Cause I know – I think abortion is a pretty common one that people are just saying you know, we're not gonna be able to deal with this one.

Colin: Right now, I don't even address it really. Because – the first thing I do is I structure a course around my strengths, right. So – and I try not to get into – and this is an answer that I have, it's not just an answer for how to avoid difficult issues, but like my whole sort of basic philosophy throughout the course is to never ask a question that the students are going to expect. I mean – I guess that's not even quite the right way to say it, but to try and focus them on things that you think are –

so first of all, that you have some expertise in, but also for things they don't generally already have a preconceived sense of, and I mean this is both an answer for how do we avoid difficult – 'cause you know – 'cause again, fights come out in class because you're talking about things that first people already have opinions on and second people already have opinions of the other person's opinions, right, on the – like there's a whole – like people are already sort of armed for certain debates and so the benefit of choosing topics that are intellectually stimulating but sort of off the beaten path that diffuses that. 'Cause then everybody's like oh, I don't know what to think about it, and that's a better place to be, I think, than I already know what to think about it.

Like – 'cause again, our – if we're reinforcing tolerance, we're reinforcing the discovery of new ideas for new ideas' sake, right, and to find ourselves in those new ideas. It's better to start in places that every – that people are more unfamiliar with because then it's a true investigation than to just sort of by row move through things. The other thing that it does is of course it cuts dramatically down on plagiarism.

Interviewer: Yes.

Colin: Right. It creates circumstances where people are just not able to –

Interviewer: To find a paper on abortion.

Colin: Yeah. So – I mean and that's – I actually had one – it's like 'cause what I teach, you know, generally in my 125 classes I teach – in my 124 classes I usually teach new novels. That's how I do it, and novels about things that are – like this is about religion but not in any way that anyone has ever really – like it's a very different approach to it.

And then in 125, I'm really interested in writing about place as a thing itself, like location, and that's of course something that – like there's a lot of intellectual interest in it. There's a lot of material about it then there's a lot of things to talk about and it raises all the important issues in terms of argument and evidence and stuff like that, but it isn't anything like – nobody's gonna throw down over it.

Interviewer: Right –

Colin: (*Laughter*) you know, and so we can have a really interesting and sophisticated sort of argument about what the Diag is and means. Sort of as an architectural structure and – it's interesting 'cause we can still get into talking about culture and religion and the way that people – the dialogue's always got like – like there's always one student who will write about the Diag, who will write about the preachers in the Diag and stuff like that but because we are framing it in a different way, we're not in a position to judge the preachers, we're only asking well what do they do to this space how do they interact with the space. What about the space draws them there –

Interviewer: Did you teach the Scott Russell Sanders and the Richard Ford from *Seeing & Writing*?

Colin: I taught the Scott Russell Sanders' "Home Place," but the Richard Ford? No, I haven't gotten to that yet. I'm only teaching a smattering of things from that.

Interviewer: Oh ok. Scott Russell Sanders has a – has "Home Place" in there and Richard Ford has "Going Home," and basically, Scott Russell Sanders talks about staying in one place and Richard Ford talks about never staying in one place.

Colin: Right.

Interviewer: So at Pitt they had us do an assignment where students had to sort of agree or disagree, and I also don't think it was a great assignment that they had us do because it did kind of – too much into like –

Colin: Yes' and no's?

Interviewer: (*Cross Talk*) which I didn't particularly like, but it's interesting reading the text next to each other.

Colin: Right. See that's another thing – I mean that's the other thing, at the college level, I think the yes/no question is the – is an incorrect question, and it also is sort of what gets us into these fights right. Where we think that – I don't college rhetoric is about persuasion as it's primary goal. It's not about this way over the other way. College writing is the search for new – it's the creation of knowledge. It's the search for new ideas, right. That's what academic argument is about, and you have arguments whose goal is not to win or lose, right, it's not like a victory thing where we're all gonna die if like this argument doesn't play out, and that's what I stress to my students.

The goal of academic argument is to explore new possibilities, and again, if you frame it that way, first of all you greatly limit the possibilities of plagiarism because so much – there's- so much of the raw material out on the web is pro/con, and then second of all is it reinforces this idea of – 'cause you know, if you accept that college rhetoric is about developing new ideas and not defeating old ideas, then you accept that the argument, counterargument model is not to destroy the counterargument but the counterargument isn't just a straw man, right. But the counterargument is there to work against because what you're ultimately producing is not plus or minus but some combination. You know, your reconciling. You know, argument is reconciliation. It's a big way that I talk about it in class that we're trying to bring together divergent perspectives into some new bigger new more complicated perspective.

Interviewer: Yeah, and I think that's what students have such a hard time with, this idea that when you're writing, you're writing to discover something.

Colin: Right.

Interviewer:

And that you shouldn't know exactly what you're – where you're going with it. Which I actually find easier, you know, in terms of like writing a story. I find that easier to explain than writing an essay because you have to have some idea and you have to plan it out, but you shouldn't know exactly where – but I think that is, you know, a good approach to it because if they're just setting out to lay out what they already think, it's not doing that work of starting something or creating something.

Colin:

Right. I mean – yeah, so that's – so when we're talking, for example, about preachers in the Diag, then rather than saying they're wrong and we're right or they're right and we're wrong, you say, well, some people are in the Diag and they take the diag for this. The preachers in the Diag, they think the Diag is for this. How are they both right; how are they both wrong. Why do they both exist in the Diag.

That's, you know – I mean the way that I – my first two essays are – 'cause I'm having them write about a place over the course of the term and there's a lot of other assignments to do, but the first two place essays the first essay is I have them go to the place and say what is the essential object to the place. Try to define – try to describe the one thing which makes the place the place and in so doing sort of assert what the main claims of the place is.

Like what is my purpose. Is that often – essential objects for the diag are the paths, the sidewalks. And more importantly the sidewalks that cross. You know, and the purpose of the diag is to intersect all these different people, to bring all these people together. So then the ultimately claim of the diag is to unify the university, to tie it together, right.

And then the next essay is a misplaced action. Look for someone doing something which you don't think fits in this place, and then assert that as a counterclaim, a counterargument. 'Cause they're saying this is what I think the place is for, and then first argue how they don't fit, but then try to figure out how they do fit 'cause obviously they're there.

So – and so – ok, diag is for walking along these paths and going to the center and unifying and then, you know, the preacher, he seems so divisive, he seems so counter – and the thing is, is that he's drawn there because everybody is there. The nature of the diag –

Interviewer:

(Cross Talk) picks that spot.

Colin: Right, but more importantly if the Diag is about bringing all kinds of people together, he belongs there just as much as anybody else, and what people notice is that when they come together, they come together to yell at the preacher, but they also come together to know who this guy is, right, and to know that he is not of them but that he also – that there's something that they can – that he has a purpose there that he recognizes that he can speak too. And if they do sort of ultimately argue against him, it's usually not because of his particular religious faith.

It's interesting, a lot of students, when you force them to get to what really bothers them about him, it's because he's being intolerant and it has nothing to do with whether he's a Christian or not, and I have both secular students and I've had Campus Crusade for Christ students come to this same conclusion and then in that they're like wait a minute, it doesn't matter whether we're Christian or we're not, we both respect the importance of tolerance. That's why we're at the university, that's why we're here, and so it has nothing – he's a jerk. Has nothing to do with what his faith is.

Interviewer: Oh I have had some of the most vehement reactions to him that have been from religious – (*Cross Talk*) –

Colin: Right, 'cause it makes 'em look bad –

Interviewer: Looks so bad, you know, thinking the word Christian is attached to that guy and that's what will come – because he's so memorable, that's what comes to people's mind when they hear that word.

Colin: See and when that is said in the beginning of class, like when you're just talking before you start the lesson, like that's a teachable moment that you grab and you say let's pause on this and say this is the reason that we're all here, regardless of sort of what are backgrounds are. We all agree he's intolerant and it has nothing to do with what he believes and has everything to do with his style, and the university is not about a belief but it's about a attitude.

Interviewer: Well, that's what I – I taught in CC Little one year or one semester when I was teaching 225, and as I walked out that day, there were people holding, you know, the gigantic photos of the aborted – results of abortion, and weren't saying anything, weren't yelling at anybody, just holding huge graphic pictures and I think there was one person offering to hand out stuff, but it was completely silent.

Which was a very different approach, right, but you know it still – you know, this very jarring thing ‘cause these huge bloody pictures and so I got to class and realized almost all of my students had to have walked past them to get to here.

So it was like ok, let’s talk about the argument that’s being made there and the way they’re making the argument, and are they – is that an effective way of making their point, and you know, we probably spent half the class talking about the rhetorical choices of the people out there had made. And you’re right, I mean it didn’t matter how people actually felt about abortion in the class, in fact I’m not sure anyone even said it, we just talked about the ways that those people out there were choosing to make their point about abortion.

Colin: Yeah, and that’s the thing, that’s what you’re expert in, and that’s when you say we’re not gonna talk about abortion but what you really mean is we’re not gonna have sort of the “substance” debate about whether or not this is right thing. But if we’re gonna talk about it, we’re gonna talk about in terms of what’s important in this class, which is rhetoric, right. You know, fairness, that kind of thing.

Interviewer: I love that argument as reconciliation, that’s really interesting. *(Laughter)* Like I can get my head around it almost and then it slips away, but I really like it.

Colin: Ok.

Interviewer: *(Laughter)* It’s one of those things that’s like oh that makes total sense. No, that doesn’t make sense. No, it makes sense and just sort of like – probably because you thought about it so much it does make – I mean it does, but it’s like when you first hear it, it sounds so kind of counterintuitive, you know.

Colin: It doesn’t – yeah, it doesn’t make sense in the sense that – it is the paradox of argument and specifically the paradox of academic argument. Because if the point of argument is the search for truth then it has to reconcile at some point because there is ultimately a thing to notice.

Interviewer: But I mean – like there is a truth?

Colin: Yeah, I mean like there is a thing that’s being said, right. Like when it gets down to it, we can argue and argue and argue, and there may ultimately be – here’s a – at least from my point of view.

This is how I know this to be true or I believe this to be true. When we look at a poem, right. We can say that a poem – a rose by any other name would smell sweet, right, which is an example that I give to my students at the beginning of my term. Now we can say that this is first arguing that names are unimportant, and it has one argument that it's making, right. That – regardless, you know – who is saying it to whom? A rose by any other name would smell sweet.

Interviewer: I think Romeo's saying it.

Colin: Is Romeo saying it to Juliet?

Interviewer: I think – I don't know if he's saying it to Juliet. I think maybe he is.

Colin: It doesn't matter though.

Interviewer: Anyway, I think Romeo is saying –

Colin: One of them is saying it to the other and then this is on the tape and here we are (*Laughter*) – we have no idea. It doesn't really matter. One is saying it to the other and on the surface it's making one argument which is just "the name doesn't matter. You would be as beautiful, right, no matter who you were, whether you were a Capulet or a Montague or whoever you were, even though you're my family's enemy." But the important thing to look at it is of course is that it's a rose, right, and that a rose – so there's other things going on. Because it's a rose, he's not just saying that she's beautiful.

He doesn't say that a violet by any other name would smell sweet or a lily by any other name would smell sweet. It's a rose, a rose has this red color, it's a passionate quality that – the particular quality of her beauty and her- their love is this kind of energy. Roses have thorns that – with the red of the rose and thorns that there – a rose by any other name would smell sweet, but their love, what ever it was called and who ever it was between, their would be as violent and as deadly and as dangerous. And so what you could say is that that one line has a series of arguments associated with it, right.

That you can read – it's like you're slicing an orange up, right, and you're cutting up in these sort of angles. It is not saying that aliens will invade tomorrow. Right, there are wrong answers, and so by definition, if there's not a infinite number of possible right

answers, by definition there is some finite number of right answers and some infinite, you know – well, also finite of wrong answers. And so there is a truth even if that truth is complicated and even if there are many, many answers that are possible there, because there are wrong answers, there's still a truth to be found. I know that this runs sort of afoul of our traditional understanding of post-modernism.

Interviewer: Right, no, that's why I asked.

Colin: I mean that's how I navigate it with my students. Is to say because we know that there are still wrong ways to interpret things, we know that there must – even if there are a lot of ways, correct ways, to interpret something, it is still a finite thing, and you might imagine it then to say that there is a truth to be gotten. There is a sort of a truth that we're moving for and if there is a truth that ultimately there has to be a place where we're gonna agree.

Interviewer: Yeah, well, I find that interesting because you said academic argument is a search for the truth or for a truth, and I think that's where people run into problems or feel like they're running into problems with Christian students because the ideal of truth – you know, with the – you know, post-modernism rejects that you have a singular unified truth, but for Christian students and students of many other belief systems too, there is a unified truth.

There is a knowable and unified truth, and I think that's where you get into problems because these are students willing to say, "I do know the truth; this is the truth," and what do you – you know, that comes off as a very intolerant thing and you could certainly – I mean it is intolerant by the definition of tolerance (*Laughter*). You know the truth; that means that the other things are not true and so you're not being tolerant. Right? I mean –

Colin: Well, from my perspective and sort of getting into this sort of notion of truth for my purposes that there's not – the important to say is of course with the poem for example, with this – and that's not even a poem. That's just like a line of poetry. It's a single line of poetry and in five minutes, like in class, sort of like in a Socratic way, we can come up with six or seven related but distinct truths, right. But the important thing is that it is distinct, which means there are multiple truths associated with it.

We can also define things that don't fit, things that are not true about it, which reinforces the notion that there is a direction to head in and a direction to avoid, but then ultimately when we get to

the line of poetry itself – and obviously a way more educated critic could even pick it apart even further and talk about not just the line itself as it stands, but how it sits in the play, how the play sits in a culture, how the culture sits in the history, and we can keep spinning this out, but there is still a periphery, right.

There's still a point at which we're no longer making sense. Where we're no longer saying something that's valid and because of that what you would say is that truth isn't a lie and isn't an answer but it's sort of a cloud. It's an array of associated possibilities, right. Like the dictionary definitions, right, have this array of possibilities and that – the reason that I like that definition is, at least for the purposes of 125 and 124, it can safely side step the argument for students. I don't know that I have all the answers there, but for the purposes of 124 and 125, it puts you in a position where you can say to, you know, the hard-core secular, humanist, post-modernist people there is perplexity there. There is a variety of truths to find, but at the same time you can say to the – there is a truth.

There's still truth there, there is a thing there to be known, and I actually – to get into it a little bit further, just purely, you know, as a private Christian I think it's a misreading of the text to say that there is a single knowable truth in the sense of one plus one equals two –

Interviewer: Oh and yeah, I think a lot of Christians – I think there is certainly debate within the Christian community –

Colin: Right –

Interviewer: But there are Christian students who, you know –

Colin: Well, I mean that's the thing, if that ever came up, and sometimes it kind of comes up, sort of in that – and that – 'cause the other thing is you're dealing with freshman and their ability to articulate the tensions that they're having or – if it comes up during my office hours, that's when you start to talk maybe a little more about it. At least I think it – you can get into a little bit of it and say, well, I don't think it's settled on that point, right.

Because really, what is a sermon? A sermon is an – it's an interpretive essay. It's a literary analysis. You have a quote from the text, you have two quotes from a text and you talk about what they possibly mean and like parables are not answers intentionally so. Like – and I mean if – and I have had – one or two occasions,

I've had interesting Christian students who've actually wanted to come in and talk about like this very issue and that's the thing to identify for them to me.

And this also part of this whole thing of professors just saying no, and not being willing to sort of go back and in and say well, where is this coming from, what's the frame for this, and say well, wait a minute, let's go back to the gospel; let's not talk on my turf, right, where you feel disempowered, but let's talk on your turf and have like an honest discussion here, and you know, not say that we're – you know, that I'm the authority, you're the authority, but let's just talk about it and say Jesus doesn't say, you know, one plus one equals two. He doesn't say it, he doesn't talk that way. He talks in parables; he talks in metaphor, right. He – and he explicitly says, people who are willing to hear this are going to hear it; people who are not willing to hear it are not going to understand it. This stuff is open for debate and I think – that's not just – and I think that's also true of all the three peoples of the book.

Like so if you get into western civilization you talk about Islam, you talk about Christianity, you talk about Judaism; all three of them come from interpretive traditions, not answer traditions. That's – in that way, if you're going to talk about Christian students in literary analysis or in kind of writing context, if you are in a position where you have to remind them of that, I think that's the thing to remind them of is that this whole thing, this whole project, we're all now grows very naturally out of like this – like the Abrahamic tradition of reading text and interpreting them.

And so to come here and become sort of shocked that people on the business of reading text and interpreting them is just totally disingenuous and – and my experience has been that the honest good students who are really – are nice people and care what's going on in the class accept that argument. On occasion, I have had jerks, and again like the guy in the Diag, they're just jerks, and it has nothing to do with them being Christian or not. You know, and they just say I don't like this book because it – my faith doesn't agree with it and it's like you're – and I just say I don't think you're being intellectually honest about this, and I can say that because I have faith and I – like reading *White Noise* does not destroy my faith in God.

You know, kinda – in fact, I want to – I would argue reading *White Noise*, as much as anything, returns me the gospels and it returns me to – because it is such a deep and meditation soul searching about death in the absence of truth, you know. Like if anything –

you know, like they say that there are no atheists in fox holes. Well, deep in the middle of DeLillo, one is so desperate for some anchor, right. And it's an exterstentious crisis novel. Like how can that novel not drive you back to some – not to any particular tradition –

Interviewer: Looking for meaning somewhere –

Colin: But something, you know, like in the face of –

Interviewer: Yeah –

Colin: It's like the sun sets and all that stuff. So –

Interviewer: I need to read that book again. I was just thinking it the other day. Oh, I have to go, but can I get in touch with you if I have any follow-up questions?

Colin: Sure.

[End of Audio]

APPENDIX D
SAMPLE INDEX FOR “TOLERANCE” OPEN INTERVIEW CODE
COMPOSITION INSTRUCTORS

Adrienne: I don’t teach any of those debates anymore. I did the first time I taught 125. I used *A Writer’s Presence* that has you know – one week you’re talking about animal rights and next week you’re talking about immigration, gay marriage, and I just think those debates are so stagnant. I don’t think there’s much new to say about them, and ***I got so angry reading their final papers*** about them because ***so many of the students, I felt, were, not intolerant, just undereducated***. I felt like I was asking them to take these enormously complex debates and take a side, and I was inevitably really disappointed...

Gina: So ***I don’t really have anything to say about tolerance*** except that I agree with you, it’s not – ***I think within the liberal academic culture, it’s conservatives of any brand that are the targets of intolerance***. But that’s probably more from faculty to students than it is among students themselves . . . I mean, I think the real mark of a master teacher is ***somebody who knows how to engage and press people that he or she disagrees with*** . . .

The one other thing that I wanted to say, and I should probably start getting ready for class, too, but – I should say that the students I described as really identified in a sub-Christian group on campus who are often the ***ones who choose to write about aspects of their faith in my experience are not intolerant***. They are often really curious, and are writing because they’re curious and they want to understand something better for themselves. So, it’s not – I mean, in my experience, the ones who really – maybe ***the ones who are less open*** are the ones who don’t want to bring their faith up at all.

Paige: the students who have said ***the most sort of intolerant things*** at least when it comes to gay issues tend not to be Jewish students or Muslim students, that ***it tends to be the Catholic students who are the most vocal about their intolerances***. That’s ***not to say there isn’t some other intolerances*** in the class, but that the “Catholic” or “Christian” students seem to be the ones that tend to be the most vocal . . .

it was the first time that I really realized my own biases and ***my own intolerance*** . . .

several students who emerged as *particularly vocal and in my mind, intolerant* of some of the texts that we were reading that had to – and mostly with gay issues. Now, there are certainly students who have written about the death penalty, or written about abortion, even though I don't usually let them write about those issues, who emerge as religious, right? Who quote scripture, and who appear to abide by certain moral beliefs and so forth, and – but those students tended – *I tended not to feel like they were intolerant*. I tended to feel like they had a belief and it didn't somehow *threaten* me in anyway, even the ones who were pro-life didn't quite seem as *threatening* to me as *the ones who were really against anything gay*. Right? I mean, I think that speaks to *my own sensitivities and issues* that I, as an instructor, come in with. And I think *I tried really hard to be unbiased* . . .

I really hit a wall when- the first time *a student said, 'Well, I can't connect to this text, or to this writer, because he's gay and that is wrong, and the Bible says this, and in God's eyes...' and I found myself- I mean, I remember vividly the first time it happened.*

So I stopped teaching gay texts for a couple of years because I didn't know how to cope with that and I didn't know how to cope with *my own intolerance* of this student and his beliefs, and that was a hard thing to come to terms with, too . . .

So, you end up imagining this mass, *this throbbing mass of intolerance that gets together every Friday night* and so I think that – and I mean, that's – I don't think that's uncommon about churches, right? Is that for people who don't go to church, who imagine this congregation who come together and sort-of get all riled up

Yvonne: I think universities, especially secular universities are not all that – I don't know, I think they portray themselves as *not being especially sympathetic to people who are very religious*. It's okay to be religious, but you sort of *keep it to yourself*, that's your personal life, you *don't bring it out into the open as much*. And if you do then – *it's just not given the same respect* as other forms of knowledge and other forms of reasoning.

U of M seems to me to go out of its way to really be, while separate, very accommodating and tolerating of all religions. So, so that feels appropriate to me. But at the same time, I wasn't brought up in a very religious environment, and *I don't know if I were someone who really did identify as an extremely devout person, I'm not sure.* I don't know how it would feel to me...

And so, and then I give them the talk about if it's religious, and then part of the assignment is that they have to argue it from both sides. And I hope that with that that if there's *issues of tolerance* that that sort of *pushes against that* a little bit for them . . .

The tolerance part of it, I think is really interesting and important. I mean, it's sort of the same kind of thing with conservative ideology in a way for me. I mean, there are times when students are *expressing things that are very much opposed to my own opinions*, but ultimately my stance is if you – *I'm not grading you on your opinions*, I'm grading you on your ability to argue it.

And so then sometimes when a question's asked, there are certain things that feel to me sort of *non-negotiable* and where *tolerance issues* – where *maybe I am intolerant of certain things*.

I don't know, *I don't always know how to talk about things and approach things with respect*, and the scary thing is – honestly – is that so many of the students are all in the same boat. *They all share this same sort of view of the world that they don't even see things as being disrespectful when they are*.

Luke: Those who are interested in a discussion-oriented student-centered kind of process oriented collaboration, and I might be lashing too many things together, but that lumping will have a different perspective from those who are much more agenda driven, have an idea of the five assignments that must be completed and what must be done in each of them. And so I can see – that polarizes things, there are many variations in between. That suggests *something between dominance and tolerance* that, first of all may have nothing to do with Christianity but sets an atmosphere for the classroom to begin with so that there certainly are *not going to be many opportunities to disagree* and have a good old fashioned row or anything like that within the classroom.

So if you set that as the – this is the kind of learning environment that we are going to have, certainly that is going to influence *what people feel comfortable saying in the classroom* or not wanting to say and that doesn't have to even come from a direct silencing that, "We've heard enough from you, let's see if somebody else has an opinion," that will come through in an almost organic way. The second thing of course is what happens when all of these personalities come in and we go through training and you get handed your handbook, and you start looking through to the way you've been pushed to do certain things in here. I would suggest that leads to a kind of openness in the sense of *intolerance in the classroom*. You get choices to a certain extent about teaching times, you

get a choice about text, you get choice in your text, you get to see 124, 125. They said the literature focus or something else, so that gives you the idea that *there should be a little more tolerance going on in here* when there's choice going on . . .

The other thing that comes into this discussion about what's going to be the focus, what am I really teaching here? Am I teaching skills relating to reading, writing, critical thinking, etcetera? And this material that kind of floats around here is a means of that, or am I teaching values, and *am I teaching tolerance* and that kind of thing. Or *am I modeling tolerance* as a way of getting at these kinds of things, and it's amazing the kind of pressure that gets put on composition teachers to do so many things that are not expected of other kinds of lecturers.

Nadia: I've *never had a student write something that just struck me as like, too outright intolerant* . . .

So, yeah. I just – I don't know. I think that it's so – even though I like to think that I have *a pretty open classroom* – it's so clear to them that *they can't say certain things* that they just don't . . . I don't think any student, honestly, would be comfortable coming out and saying I disapprove of gay marriage.

Colin: And I think the problem that happens, you know, in the classroom, is that both sides are consciously or unconsciously being disingenuous about the complexity of the situation. You know, where they – you know, they choose to assert their power when it's convenient and then assert their victimhood when it's convenient, and then in both – and what I think is really frustrating in the classroom is – especially when we're talking about freshman comp, it's like that's the real focus. *The students and the professors are both doing, right, but the professor should know better, and that I think is the key, and that's where tol – that's the whole thing of tolerance* . . .

They say, 'I don't like this book because it- my faith doesn't agree with it,' and it's like you're—and I just say, 'I don't think you're being intellectually honest about this', and I can say that because I have faith and I- like reading *White Noise* does not destroy my faith in God.

It's interesting, *a lot of students, when you force them to get to what really bothers them about him, it's because he's being intolerant* and it has nothing to with whether he's a Christian or not, and I have both secular students and I've had Campus Crusade for Christ students come to this same conclusion and then in that they're like wait a minute, *it doesn't*

matter whether we're Christian or we're not, we both respect the importance of tolerance. That's why we're at the university, that's why we're here, and so it has nothing – he's a jerk. Has nothing to do with what his faith is.

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